PENGUIN CLASSICS

EMERALDS_AND_LILLIES

What Souls Are Made Of

What Souls Are Made Of

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/35109247.

Rating:
Explicit

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Categories:
F/M, M/M

Fandom:
Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling

Relationships:
Harry Potter/Tom Riddle | Voldemort, Hermione Granger/Ron Weasley

Characters:
Harry Potter, Tom Riddle, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Albus Dumbledore, Abraxas Malfoy, Original Characters

Additional Tags:
Legilimency (Harry Potter), Horcruxes, Sexual Tension, Harry and Dumbledore friendship, Mind Games, Time Travel, Slow Burn, Sexual Content, The Golden Trio, Angst, Obsession, Unhealthy Relationships, Eventual Romance, Don’t copy to another site

Language:
English

Collections:
hp stories, k's fav fics, Tomarry~, International Fanworks Day 2022 - Classic Fic Recs, Hp random love, Mine: in body; mind & soul [TMRR], Harry Potter/Voldemort | Tom Riddle Longfics, Top-Tier Complete Tomarrymort Fics, top_tommary_completed, Best Tomarry, 🐰 Bunni's Harry Potter favorites⚡, ListadeLeitura, I'm crying omg, HP (in progress), La crème de la crème, à relire parce que faut pas les oubliées, Tomarry fics that are Good and I think you should read :), Fics that made me stim, Se eu perde-las, FavouritesFics, Tomarry Fics For Later, Прочитанное, Tomarry fic collection best read, all time favorites, My fav harry potter fics, HarryTom, Tomarry AU's, Harry

Stats:
Published: 2021-12-13 Completed: 2022-03-17 Words: 277,747
Chapters: 51/51

What Souls Are Made Of

by Emeralds_and_Lilies

Summary

A mysterious object in Bellatrix's vault sends Harry, Ron and Hermione spinning into the past and to a Hogwarts like none they know.
Posing as students, Harry catches the eye of the Head Boy, Tom Riddle, who is nothing like the Voldemort of the future. He's charming and sly and manipulative; both brillant and deadly.

It isn't long before they're tangled in a game more intricate than anything before. A game of heightened stakes, of tension, and the odds are stacked against Harry. With the threads of the future unravelling, can Harry make it out intact? And what is the cost, of truly getting close to Tom?

Notes

I'm delighted to say this fic has a couple of ongoing translation, which you can find here:
Russian translation:here
Italian translation: here
Turkish translation: here
Spanish translation: here

Please do not reupload my fic on any other sites.

- Translation into Русский available: What Souls Are Made Of (Из чего сделаны души) by Ainy_Da, ClareKin
- Translation into Русский available: What Souls Are Made Of | Из чего сделаны души by Ponchic_Loco

The Shattered Clock Face

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

'He's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.'

— Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights

Part I

It was so dark in Bellatrix's vault that even with all three of their wands lit, Harry couldn't make out anything in the distance. His eyes swept over many piles of gold and saucer-like objects but Hufflepuff's cup wasn't one of them. It was becoming harder and harder to avoid touching anything. Several times, he felt a sharp blister of pain as the objects underneath his feet multiplied.

He shone the wand further, and the light bounced off something that glittered. It stood out from the diamonds, the great pearl necklaces, like a brilliant beam of sunlight. Harry was moving forward without being aware of what he was doing, through the piles of expanding objects without even feeling them.

It was a pocket-watch.

Surprisingly heavy, the watch face seemed to shine, like a luminous clock.

'Hermione,' Harry said, turning it over so its light flickered off the gold underfoot. 'What do you think of this?'

But it wasn't Hermione who came up beside him. It was Ron.

'That's not the Horcrux,' Ron said.

Harry barely heard him. The clock-face was too mesmerising to look away from. A tiny voice at the back of his head was saying this was wrong . . . They had to find the Horcrux right now . . .

The hands of the clock were spinning, so fast it was a blur.

‘Harry! Quickly!’ Hermione’s voice sounded like a distant echo. ‘Put it down, Harry. Put it down right now.’

She was beside him, and her voice had risen in high hysterics. Gold was multiplying around them, glowing red-hot. Griphook was a tiny shape in the distance.

Hermione lunged for the pocket-watch, intent to bat it from his hands. Ron reached at the same time and there was a great flash as all their hands touched.

Light – brilliant, dazzling white light – seemed to burst from it. There was a noise, high, like the sound of the train. It was a humming, building louder and louder. Harry felt like he was spinning – falling – everything was a haze and the vault seemed to disappear. It was apparition and floo powder – the squeeze of movement, like he was going to be crushed. His lungs were bursting – he was squeezing Hermione’s hand so tight bones were bound to shatter –

White, blinding light, that was far from brilliant -

And then it cleared.

Harry landed on something hard. His hands hit the ground and immediately began to sting. His head was still spinning but the squeezing sensation disappeared. When he regained his balance, he was up on his feet, wand out.

This had to be an illusion.

Ron and Hermione were already standing up, their wands out also. ‘We’re back here?’ Ron said. ‘What the bloody hell?’

Harry’s heart was still pumping with adrenaline and the sheer fear of sneaking into Gringotts. It felt impossible. They were in Bellatrix’s vault. Not here.

Not with the grass and the trees – they had been underground, for God’s sake – and the great, dark Lake. That hut – Harry would recognise it anywhere.

‘How are we at Hogwarts?’ he said, squeezing Malfoy’s wand tighter.

‘Hermione – ‘

Hermione was very white. ‘Griphook,’ she said, in a moan. ‘Harry he’s still there!’

Harry felt a sick sensation in his stomach. He was still in the vault, amongst the piles of multiplying treasure. ‘He’ll get out,’ he said. *Would he?* ‘The minute we left.’

Hermione looked like she was ready to cry. Bellatrix’s robes had many holes in them, the ends completely cut off, so the tatty remains ended at her knees. She and Ron were both covered in red, blistering cuts and Harry supposed he had similar.

‘If You-Know-Who finds out we’re at Hogwarts,’ Ron said. ‘Then we’re done for. You can’t apparate out.’

They were meant to be in Gringotts but, right now, they were the most wanted people in the Wizarding World in a place Voldemort controlled.

‘The forest,’ Harry said firmly. ‘Let’s wait in the forest and figure something out.’ They backed into the dark trees, away from the Lake and the pathways. The silhouette of Hogwarts grew fainter.

‘It’s that stupid clock,’ Ron said. ‘Riddled with dark magic.’

‘Why did you pick it up anyway, Harry?’ There was an edge to Hermione’s voice – her fear coming out in annoyance. ‘We would still be there if you hadn’t.’

Harry swallowed. ‘It was like . . . I was under a spell. Like the Imperius. But I couldn’t fight it.’

He couldn’t describe the need to pick it up, how it would have killed him to fight it, how he wanted that stupid object more than anything else in the entire world.

His hand unfolded around the pocket-watch and Hermione gasped.

It was burnt.

The metal surrounding the face of it had melted out of the shape and the glass had shattered. Large cracks ran up it, the entire thing blackened, like it had gone through an explosion. Even as it sat in his hand, Harry felt like it was ready to crumble apart. The hands were no

longer ticking, instead stuck in a fixed position of *8:32*.

And it had never felt more ordinary.

'Just – put it in your pocket,' Hermione said. 'It must be a Portkey.'

'A trap,' Ron said.

A trap.

And Harry had brought them right into it.

They went further into the forest, until the trees overhead formed a thick canopy. The only sunlight that appeared was in slivers. Harry tripped over several tree roots before they eventually stopped. Only then did Hermione stop glancing back. She winced every time they stepped on the leaves underfoot and the harsh crunching sound they made.

Harry's feet felt hot and blistered. He wished more than anything for the Dittany he knew was in Hermione's bag. To feel it soothe his tender skin . . . perfectly cool.

For a minute, he panicked, checking inside his jacket. He breathed in relief. The cloak was still there. He had his wand, his cloak and his mokeskin pouch. They were ok.

They reached a clearing. It was dark and eerily silent. There were no birds; no trees rustling. Everything was still, like the forest itself was holding its breath.

'What are we going to do?' Ron said. 'We can't go near the castle. Or Hogsmeade.'

'What's at the other side of the forest?' Hermione said.

'A herd of Acromantula,' Ron muttered.

'Spiders aren't called a *herd* – '

Their whispering sounded like shouting; Harry was half expecting centaurs, or Death-Eaters, to come bursting into the clearing at any moment.

'When it's night-time,' he said. 'We sneak out of the grounds and Apparate away.'

He hoped Voldemort wouldn't have people patrolling. Snape, of course, was headmaster—the thought filled Harry with such an intense, burning anger that he gripped Malfoy's wand so hard green sparks spat out.

'Harry,' Hermione said.

At first, he thought she was disapproving on the sake of the wand. But she was staring off into the greenish gloom, fingers on her lips. And then Harry heard it.

Twigs snapping, leaves crunching. Trampling footsteps.

They stood there, no-one making a sound. Harry had never been more aware of his breathing, or his heart hammering. The noise got closer, something getting nearer.

And then through the trees was the silhouette of a person. His eyes must have been playing tricks on him, or the trees had shrunk, because the person seemed unnaturally large. And then they began to hum.

Softly, in a rumbling voice. Harry heard the words *Hippogriffs and Nifflers.* It almost sounded like a nursery rhyme. His fear melted away.

'Hagrid,' he said, and then louder, moving forward, striding across the clearing.

The humming stopped.

'Is someone 'ere?'

The voice was wrong. It was higher, younger, without the deepness or any of the warmth Harry had been accustomed to.

He stopped in his tracks and finally, the person came into the light. Tall, twice as tall as Harry. A mane of tumbling brown hair and dark eyes. But his face –

Harry couldn't help it. He gasped.

It was Hagrid alright, if he had been shrunk down to a teenager. There wasn't a hint of a beard on his smooth, pink cheeks. Not a wrinkle, not a line. To Harry, he looked like a gigantic baby.

'What –' he began to stammer.

‘Who are you?’ Hagrid took a few steps back. In his hand was a bucket of raw meat. ‘I don’t mean no trouble.’

He looked scared.

‘Hagrid, what happened? Why are you—’ Harry waved his hand.

But there was no recognition on Hagrid’s face. ‘I’ll need to report this to Dumbledore. This is Hogwarts property. No-one’s meant to be ‘ere.’

Dumbledore? But Dumbledore was dead.

A cold feeling spread through Harry’s stomach.

‘Would you mind telling us the year, please?’ Hermione’s voice was high and nervous. ‘We’re lost, you see.’

‘Lost? Here? It’s – er - 1944.’

1944.

Hagrid, if anything, looked even more troubled. Harry’s head spun, just as bad as it had in the vault.

1944.

That wasn’t possible.

‘Dumbledore,’ Ron said. ‘We need him. I mean, can you take us? Please?’

‘Professor Dippet’s the headmaster,’ Hagrid said.

He was shuffling uncomfortably on the spot, taking in their dishevelled appearances. ‘You’ll be needing him, I’d reckon.’

‘No, Dumbledore,’ Harry said. His chest constricted as he said the word. ‘There seems to have been a mistake.’

Hagrid took them back through the forest and onto the grounds. It seemed to take longer than it had the first time, or maybe that was just the dread. This could still be a trap. They were being lured into a

false sense of security and then Voldemort would appear.

A trap, a trap, a *trap*.

None of them talked on the way there. Hermione was clutching her beaded bag, like it was the only thing she had.

1944.

A part of Harry knew this wasn't a trick. His hand went into his pocket, absent-mindedly tracing over the pocket-watch.

Why had he picked it up anyway? Why couldn't he fight whatever curse came over him?

As they reached the edge of the forest, the spaces between the trees got wider and sunlight flooded in. Harry kept his eyes on the ground yet he still managed to trip. The roots were hidden under all the freshly-fallen leaves. Only . . . why were there fallen leaves?

It was May.

'Are there students in the castle, Hagrid?' Harry said, struggling to catch up with his long strides.

'It's September,' Hagrid said, and laughed. 'Course there is.'

They reached the edge of the forest. Hagrid turned around to look at them curiously. 'What are your names?'

'Harry. Just Harry.'

'Hermione.'

'Ron.'

Hagrid raised his bushy eyebrows. 'I'm Rubeus, myself. But it's Hagrid. Always has been. Course, you knew that.' His eyes narrowed. 'How did you know that?'

'That's why we need Dumbledore.'

Even saying it, Harry couldn't believe it. Here, Dumbledore was alive.

'We're – not supposed to be here.'

Awful things have happened to wizards who meddled with time.

Fourteen-year-old Hermione's words came back to him. Eighteen-year-old her looked like she was thinking the exact same thing. They went up the stone steps and Hagrid pushed open the great oak doors.

Wouldn't it be just great, Harry thought, if supper was over and the swarm of students saw them being marched in?

Hermione was still dressed as Bellatrix and that was certainly a sight. They looked like they had just been in a duel. Maybe it would scare Dumbledore so much he would immediately find a way to bring them back.

The doors opened and the corridor was empty. There were voices coming from the Great Hall but Hagrid led them up the stairs to the Headmaster's Office.

'We need Dumbledore,' Harry said. He gave the stone gargoyle a mistrustful look. 'Not . . .'

'Dippet,' Ron supplied.

Hagrid scratched his head. 'How about Dumbledore and the headmaster? You still haven't said what yer doing here.'

He grumbled a password that was too quiet to hear. They followed the spiral steps into the office.

It wasn't the same as when Professor Dumbledore had owned it. Gone were all the trinkets, the spindly table. There was no Pensieve; no perch holding a Phoenix. Behind the desk was a small man smoking a pipe. His head was almost entirely bald, only a few wisps of hair remaining. He seemed to sink down in the seat, swallowed by it.

'Headmaster,' Hagrid said, and gave a sort of awkward half-bow. Harry thought he looked like a tree trying to snap itself in half. 'Found these in the forest. Wanted to see you.'

He put the pipe down and looked at them through small eyes, sunken into his face. 'You found them in the forest? How do you know they aren't with Grindelwald? Merlin, was there a fight?'

'Sorry, sir,' Hermione jumped in. 'We're running from him. And we really need Professor Dumbledore.'

'Professor Dumbledore?'

‘You see, we’re not supposed to be here. It was a portkey –’

‘Portkeys can’t access Hogwarts.’

‘This one did. We were in trouble and it brought us here –’

Harry wasn’t sure if Hermione was acting but her voice was climbing higher and higher, wobbling, like she was beginning to –

‘Rubeus,’ Dippet said. ‘Will you please bring Professor Dumbledore up here?’

Hagrid looked like there was nothing he wanted better than to flee the office. Harry couldn’t blame him.

Would they tell Dumbledore the truth? They would have to, if they wanted to get back. He couldn’t help feeling frustrated. Dumbledore had sent them on the Horcrux hunt. He was the one who hadn’t told them anything. But that Dumbledore was *dead* .

The man who entered the office was fifty years younger. His long auburn hair was swept back with a green ribbon and his beard fell to his shoulders, not his waist. Harry felt like someone had punched him in the stomach.

It was Dumbledore. Alive in the office.

His mouth seemed to dry up, something inside him seemed to burst--a tumour, his insides filling up with poison. 'Sir,’ Harry managed to say. He closed his mouth again before he managed to say something like, ‘I missed you.’

‘I don’t know how we got here.’

Behind half-moon spectacles, those blue eyes surveyed them. 'You wanted to see me?' A frown. 'And how did you get here? The wards - '

'We didn't apparate,' Harry said. He looked at Hermione.

Could they tell him?

A voice whispered in his head. *If you can't trust, what will you ever accomplish?*

They would never leave here. They would have to do everything in secret. And Dumbledore - Harry didn't know if he could lie to him. He wanted answers, and the line between this Dumbledore and his

Dumbledore (*dead*) was blurring.

He took one look at Dippet and said the most dangerous sentence he had in his entire life. 'We got here by a time-turner.'

So they told him. Dumbledore took them to his office, a small room with bookshelves in the walls. Fawkes was on his perch, only a small chick. Harry kept the story short, but occasionally Hermione and Ron would butt in.

'Horcruxes. You left us a task, you see. Find them all and destroy them.'

Dumbledore's face seemed to fall when Harry said that. The twinkle disappeared from his eyes and even though Harry had never seen him younger, he looked like he had aged a century.

'You had to,' Harry said quickly. 'This war - 'he shuddered even thinking of it. 'Voldemort - '

'He's killing everyone,' Ron said. 'And he can't die.'

'We have to go back, sir,' Hermione said. 'You must understand. If we stay here too long everything will change. We might erase our own existence. Or cause millions of deaths. So, if there's anything you can think of - anything at all - we'll do it.'

Even spend half a year trooping through forests, Harry thought. Eating scraps and living in a tent.

'Show me this device, please.'

Harry took the pocket-watch from his pocket. It looked just like a piece of rubbish, an old, broken, blacked clock that should be tossed in the bin. He didn't know what he was expecting Dumbledore to do - maybe some strange chant, some explosion of light that would send them back.

Instead there was nothing.

Dumbledore turned it over in his hands several times and tried about a dozen spells. There wasn't even a reaction. A 'Scourgify' didn't

remove any of the dirt, the ‘Reparo’ didn’t fix anything. Whatever Dumbledore’s spells were meant to do, did not work.

He handed the pocket-watch back and Harry reluctantly took it. He didn’t want the stupid thing. It was only a reminder of his own mistake.

‘Right now, I have no answer for you,’ Dumbledore said. ‘We have no means of sending people into the future now, like you do.’

‘That’s the thing,’ Hermione said. ‘We don’t either. The furthest a person can go back is five hours without any serious harm. Not *fifty years*.’

’And you found this Time-Turner in the Lestrange vault? After you . . . broke into Gringotts.’

‘We needed to find the Horcrux,’ Harry said. ‘Voldemort —’

‘He’s the most powerful Dark Lord of all time,’ Ron said. ‘And caused more destruction than Grindelwald ever did.’

Grindelwald .

Dumbledore’s face went through about a dozen expressions at once before settling into a grim resolve. ‘I won’t ask about Grindelwald,’ he said. ‘Awful things can happen if we let the future influence our choices. But I’m afraid you are stuck here until we find a solution.’

He smiled. ‘Of course, time could naturally revert itself and one moment you will find yourself here and the next, right back where you left off. It’s the most mysterious thing.’

‘You mean we could be here forever?’ Ron’s mouth was half-hanging open. ‘What about our *families* ?’

‘I will do my very best to help you, Mr—’

‘Weasley.’

‘We have a Weasley in sixth year. Septimus. He looks just like you.’

Ron’s eyes widened. ‘That’s my grandad.’

Dumbledore’s smile was warmer this time. ‘And I trust you won’t inform him of this fact?’

‘Of course not.’

‘Good, very good. I promise I will try and find a way to send you back to your time. But in the meantime, I think it would be best if you finished your schooling. This is your seventh year, correct?’

They nodded. Harry opened his mouth to protest - but what was the point?

Hermione got there before him. ‘How can we prevent something from changing?’ Her hands were wringing anxiously together. Harry knew she was restraining from tearing at her hair. ‘Our simple *existence* could send the whole future into disaster.’

‘What would you suggest then? The very fact you managed to travel this far indicates that was not a normal time-turner. Perhaps you were meant to be here.’

‘No,’ Harry said. ‘No way.’

The future was chaos. It was war and blood and green light that you could see when you closed your eyes. But it was the Weasleys. It was Ginny. What happened when they disappeared? Every moment they were here Voldemort was killing more people; hunting Harry down like a dog after a scent.

‘That’s where we belong.’

Ron nodded grimly. The Weasleys were his family more than Harry’s. Hermione had her parents in Australia.

I have to get them back .

Dumbledore looked between the three of them and Harry wondered what he saw.

Was it soldiers? Clothes all but rags, faces hard and set, determined to go on?

Or children? In need of a good wash, still wild-eyed and awkward-limbed? Covered in painful red burns, with faces too young to have seen horrors, bones sticking out from every meal they had missed?

‘I thought that after Grindelwald, the Wizarding World wouldn’t see another Dark Lord for centuries.’ He sighed, his hand moving to his beard, which he stroked.

Harry wanted to ask. Rita Skeeter's book was at the forefront of his mind. The picture in Godric's Hollow. Had he suspected? Deep down somewhere, had he *known?*

He wanted to ask about the Deathly Hallows.

But here, in this time, Grindelwald has already caused so much death and pain. It was unpreventable. And for Dumbledore, the wound would be open, not scabbed over by time.

Grindelwald was the past or soon would be.

But what if -

Hermione talked about not changing the future. The butterfly effect. Mass destruction that wizards couldn't even comprehend.

Perhaps you were meant to be here.

But Harry couldn't let the same thing happen again.

'If we could stop Voldemort now,' Harry said. 'Before he's even born. There's a muggle man, Tom Riddle. And Merope Gaunt feeds him a love potion and they have a son. If we could stop that happening, he wouldn't even exist. '

The hand in the beard froze. And Harry knew something was wrong - knew he was forgetting something important.

'Tom Riddle, you say? I suppose I should have known.'

Harry nodded. Uncertainty filled his stomach. He didn't like the look on Dumbledore's face one bit.

'Tom Riddle is our Head Boy.'

Harry didn't know how he had forgotten. 1944. Of course.

After so many memories he had seen of Voldemort's childhood, how had he forgotten? If Voldemort was Head Boy that meant he had already made one Horcrux, the diary. Myrtle was already dead. Hagrid has been framed.

‘It wasn’t Hagrid,’ Harry blurted out. ‘That killed Myrtle. It was him.’

‘If you can prove that, Harry, is the question. I always knew Tom had something to do with those attacks and I’ve been watching him closely even since.’

Keeping an annoyingly close eye on me , the diary had said.

‘The other teachers are most enamoured. Tom Riddle is not someone you want as your enemy.’

‘You mean we’re meant to let the tosser just grow up and kill everyone?’ Ron said, forgetting for a moment who he was talking to.

‘Leave it to me. For now, you are ordinary students. I don’t see the need for false names as no-one will recognise you. Now let’s see . . .’

’Mr Potter, you and Miss Granger were brought in by Mr Weasley when you were very young. You were home-schooled in Ireland but a recent attack by Grindelwald killed your family and you were forced here, where he has not conquered. The severity and freshness of this accident should stop the students from pressing with questions. And it’s not as if transfer students are something foreign.’

‘So we just pretend . . . everything’s normal?’ Harry said.

‘Until we figure out a solution to this problem, I think that’s best. You will be sorted later this evening at supper-time. I will introduce you - and make sure the students don’t think anything is awry - and you will continue on as normal.’

‘While trying to find a way home,’ Ron said.

‘Quite. Now, we can work on this backstory more. It wouldn’t do to antagonise Tom Riddle. No matter what he is and becomes in your future, he is not your ordinary seventh-year student. When I say he excels at magic that would be putting it mildly. He mustn’t find out anything about the future or things will be devastating.’

He held Harry’s gaze.

‘He may be more of a monster than a student but I cannot help you if you’re in Azkaban. Do you understand?’

Harry understood. But perhaps not how Dumbledore intended. He had to find that diary and destroy it. His purpose here was exactly the

same as the future. Isn't that what Dumbledore wanted of him?

The Chosen One?

Wasn't this what he had been *raised* for?

'I understand.'

The longer they sat in that office the more Harry itched to move. He wasn't used to sitting around anymore, being on the run he felt like he had a constant target on his back and that he had to check behind him every couple of minutes. For Death Eaters. Snatchers.

While he sat, he kept his hand in his pocket, curled around the time-turner. He had hoped something would happen, that it would heat up or start to glow. But it didn't. Hermione wanted to rehearse their story a dozen times and Harry and Ron exchanged looks. Ron inclined his head as if to say *nutter* .

'What if something about the future accidentally slips out? Like - a Quidditch match score.'

Ron sat up. '1945 the Wasps win the World cup. If I had galleons to bet with. We'd be loaded!'

'But what would be the point in the money?' Harry said. 'When we go back everything will be pointless.'

'Exactly, Harry,' said Hermione, glaring at Ron.

He muttered something under his breath about pretending to be a Seer. 'Trelawney does it.'

Dumbledore cleared his throat and they turned around. 'You'll need to see our matron. Those are some nasty burns. And of course, the time-travel could have any effects on your bodies.'

Hermione agreed readily. She had a look on her face like she suspected they would all explode at any moment.

They followed Dumbledore through the castle and spent at least an hour in the Hospital Wing. Their cuts were healed, several scans were

performed and Dumbledore transfigured their tatty clothes into simple black robes with the Hogwarts crest.

'I believe it's supper-time,' he finally said. 'And time to re-join your houses.' His eyes twinkled. 'As Head of Gryffindor I must say it would be a pleasure to have you three.'

They left the Infirmary and went down the flights of stone steps. The castle hadn't changed much. There were some portraits missing and the stone interior looked fresher, like it had been given a proper scrub. Maybe it's because Filch wasn't about, Ron had said. And they had a better caretaker.

When they reached the Great Hall, Harry, Ron and Hermione shared a look.

'Anyone feel like a first year?' Hermione said.

Ron grinned weakly. 'At least we don't have to fight a mountain-troll. We've done this before'

The doors pulled open and they stepped inside. Immediately, there was a hush.

Harry should have been used to attention by now but instead, he couldn't think of anything better than the ground opening up and swallowing him whole. It didn't sound too bad. Quiet and safe, without hundreds of gawking eyes and whispering voices.

'I'm very pleased to introduce our new seventh-year students who have sought sanctuary here after the devastation Grindelwald has caused. I hope you will do your best to make them feel at home. We all deserve a little comfort in these dark times.'

The sorting began.

Hermione was first. Her legs wobbled as she sat down on the spindly chair, and for a horrible moment, it seemed like she would fall over.

Minutes passed. *What was keeping the bloody hat?*

'GRYFFINDOR!'

The Gryffindor table began to clap. When Hermione pulled the hat off her head, her face was full of relief.

'Tried to put her in Ravenclaw, I bet,' Ron said, but his face was

pleased.

He was called next. It went far faster than Hermione's sorting. The hat covered his head one second, and the next –

'*GRYFFINDOR!'*

It was only Harry now. He glanced over at the Gryffindor Table. Ron gave him a thumbs up. He looked at all the unfamiliar faces, and then the ones he recognised at the staff table.

'Harry Potter, please.'

He sat on the stool.

Gryffindor, he thought, as Dumbledore placed the sorting hat on his head. It didn't cover his eyes like it had as a first year. He closed them just the same.

Another little time-traveller, the sorting hat said. *But oh, you have ambition. Lots of it. A strong determination.*

I need to be in Gryffindor with Ron and Hermione , Harry thought.

Gryffindor? But we've tried that already, haven't we? You have bravery and Gryffindor would benefit you well. But if you really want to end things, then you need Salazar's house. You need cunning.

I need my friends, Harry thought. *Gryffindor.*

If you truly want to achieve your plans, what you need is SLYTHERIN.

The last word had been spoken out loud.

Harry took the hat from his head and his eyes immediately went to Ron and Hermione. They were both bug-eyed. Ron had that same look on his face as when Harry had kissed Ginny in the Common Room. Like he didn't know what to think.

The applause from the Slytherins was far more muted. Ron and Hermione had warm and welcoming Gryffindor and Harry had a bunch of mistrustful slimy snakes.

When he reached the table, he froze. Nothing could have prepared him. It was like a punch straight in the stomach.

Sitting there, posing as a schoolboy, was Voldemort himself. He was

the first thing that caught Harry's eye. Between acne-marred teenagers, with messy hair and uniforms-- features too big or too small, ties out of place, rumpled jumpers---Voldemort was something unnatural.

He was Fleur at the Triwizard Tournament. And Harry stared, unable to look away, no matter how much he wanted to. His skin was pale, so much that it seemed luminescent. His black hair fell in a tidy curl over his forehead. The hollow beneath his cheekbones flickered in the candle-light. His dark eyes —

Red, snake-like, inhuman

— followed Harry until he sat down in a space between some younger girls. He didn't care if he was at the younger end of the table. All he needed was to get away from Voldemort. Far, far away.

Preferably the other side of the hall with the Gryffindors.

'Don't look so shocked,' a girl said. 'We don't bite, you know.'

Harry raised his eyebrows. He was sure they were on their best-behaviour, like Voldemort's very own pets. Through the rest of the meal, he kept sneaking glances at Ron and Hermione. What would happen if he just got up and moved table? If only for a chat.

'So, why did you really come to Hogwarts?' a boy said. He was about Harry's age, with a very hooked nose.

'What do you mean why did I really come? '

'You get home-schooled for six years - you and those two Gryffindors - then your parents just decide to send you here? For safety?' Beneath the curiously, there was a glimmer of something cruel in the boy's eyes.

'You can dig them up and ask them if you like.'

His mouth fell open and someone beside him snickered.

'Very subtle, Edwin,' a voice said. 'You know just how to make people feel welcome.'

Harry would know that voice anywhere. It wasn't the high, cold one he remembered, but it was Voldemort nevertheless; dark and smooth and poisonous.

Harry turned around and met Voldemort's eyes. It took his greatest effort to sit still. His hands were shaking and he gripped his cutlery so hard the metal began to bend. Right there, only half a dozen seats away, was the monster who had killed his parents.

'I'm sorry,' the boy muttered, looking down at the table.

Harry turned away and didn't speak to anyone for the rest of the meal. He finished as fast as he could - the Hogwarts food was painfully good after months on the run - and glanced back over at Ron and Hermione.

He had stood up to go over to them - students were beginning to break away and mill out of the hall - when someone grabbed his wrist. Harry spun around, wrenching it back.

It was a girl. Her eyes widened at his force and she rubbed her hand. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘Reflexes.’

She looked vaguely familiar, though Harry didn’t know anyone with pale eyes and curly black hair. It was something in the indignant expression on her face; the way her lips curled up in a way that made her look superior. Harry knew someone else who had pulled that exact face without meaning to.

‘And you are?’ He said, just managing to keep his voice even.

‘Lucretia Black. And you’re lucky I do second chances.’

Black.

Sirius.

His head thrown back in laughter. The look of surprise as he went through the veil.

Bellatrix. Matted hair and maniac eyes. Laughter that seemed to rattle - like bones knocking together.

‘We’re going to the Slytherin Common Room,’ she said, watching Harry with a funny look on her face. He couldn’t tell what she was thinking. ‘You should come. Introductions are in order and Slughorn will want to talk to you.’

Harry had forgotten. He was meant to have never been to Hogwarts

before. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘Of course.’

Lucretia’s suggestion hadn’t sounded like a suggestion at all – more a *demand.* And the eyes of the people at the table, like a pack of wolves staring at a deer, never left him.

Was he acting weird? Suspicious?

He looked back at Voldemort but he had turned away, in conversation with one of the others. *Death Eaters.*

Harry would pull it off as traumatised. Stupid, even. His guardians had been killed by Grindelwald and now Harry was just the idiot boy who didn’t speak. Then he would fix the Time-Turner

(kill Voldemort)

and go back to the present.

Moments later, Headmaster Dippet signalled the end of supper. ‘If everyone could go back to their Common Rooms, please. Finish off any homework you may have. And please do your best to show our new students around.’

There was a screeching of chairs as everyone stood up.

‘You heard him,’ a boy said. He was pale in a way that made him look unwell. Blonde hair, almost the same colour as his skin, fell into his eyes. He spoke in an unmistakably lofty voice.

‘I’m Abraxas Malfoy, by the way. A seventh year as well. The Common Room’s this way.’

They went to the dungeons. Harry didn’t have to fake his wonder at the castle - even though it wasn’t the same, this was still Hogwarts. And god had he missed it.

They went down several corridors, which all looked identical. When they reached a wall, the Slytherins inched back. Voldemort made his way forward, and the crowd of people parted.

‘The password is serpent-tongue,’ he said, turning to tell Harry. ‘Very creative, you know.’

Harry didn’t answer. He turned away, missing Voldemort’s frown.

His strange attempt at sarcasm just reminded Harry of how unnatural

this whole situation was - here he was, going to school with the man who'd killed his parents.

He followed the rest of the Slytherins into the Common Room. It was almost exactly as it had been in second year.

Darker than the Gryffindor Common Room, the whole room was bathed in a green light coming from hanging circular lamps. The flame flickering in the fireplace was emerald, like someone was ready to use to floo. There were several circular windows that reminded Harry of portholes on a ship. Through them was the dark, murky water of the lake.

'The boy's dormitory's on the left of that staircase,' Voldemort said.

Harry looked down at the carpet, which was patterned with snakes.

'Seventh years are at the end of the corridor. There's one dorm so you shouldn't get lost.'

Someone sniggered.

Harry didn't trust himself to raise his eyes from the carpet so instead he focused on the ugly snakes and nodded. It was better the Slytherins think he was a weak, nervous fool than have Voldemort suspicious.

'One dormitory?' he said. 'Won't it be crowded?'

He was not sleeping in a room with Voldemort. He wouldn't – he *couldn't.*

Voldemort smiled but there was no warmth. 'We'll manage,' he said. 'And Harry?'

Harry looked up.

'There's traditions in this house. Rules you'll come to discover.'

Like*, muggles are dirt.* And *don't get caught.*

'It will all make sense. After all, you were sorted here for a reason.'

He couldn't take it anymore. Every word from Voldemort's mouth had several layers. The others seemed to be holding their breath as he talked and it was taking everything in Harry to not start firing curses. 'I'm going to the dorm,' he said. 'You know, get settled it.'

He went up the stairs two at a time, dozens of eyes on him. And within them, Harry felt Voldemort's searing through his back the whole way, even when he reached the dormitory and closed the door tight.

Down in the Common Room, the occupants watched Harry's quick departure. Sitting beside the fireplace, so close she seemed to become part of it, a girl narrowed her eyes. 'Paranoid sort, isn't he?' she said.

Tom Riddle moved to stand beside her, entirely blocking out the firelight. 'Quite. And perhaps for good reason.'

She grinned. Her teeth were straight and white but against the flickering light, she gave the impression of a shark. ‘He’s a Slytherin, though.’

Tom Riddle shrugged. ‘And his friends are Gryffindors. Did you see the way he was staring back at them?’

‘Like a lost puppy.’

‘He could be a threat. Or an ally. If you gain his trust, Belinda, and let him spill his little heart, we won’t have any problem.’

She frowned. It contrasted sharply with the smoothness of her face. ‘Of course, m’lord. Wouldn’t you be the best for that, though? Gaining his trust?’

The intensity of Tom’s dark eyes made Belinda shiver.

‘He doesn’t seem to like me. And don’t underestimate yourself. If he’s an imposter, he’ll slip up eventually.’ His hand reached over and touched hers, ever so slightly.

‘And if he’s just a pathetic little mudblood?’

‘Then he won’t be a problem.’

The dormitory was the same but different. Gone were Dean's West Ham posters and Neville's mimbulus mimbletonia. There weren't any clothes thrown on the ground or trunks half open to trip over in the dark. But Harry did spy some socks peeking from under someone's bed and Quidditch gear stacked in the corner. Six beds formed a semi-circle. Harry went through each of them but it was obvious which one was his. The bare one, with no belongings, no trunk, no alarm clock on the side table.

He read the names on each of the trunks. *Harold Avery … Edwin Rosier … Alphard Black …* (he was the boy with the socks) *… Abraxas Malfoy …*

Tom Riddle.

His bed was right beside Harry's. Perfect.

Wouldn't any of the Death Eaters want to swap? Get close and personal with their Lord?

He drew the curtains and sat down. At least it was beside the door. That way he could sneak out in the night and no-one would know.

He didn't know how long he stayed there but hours seemed to pass. In Harry's head he was thinking of plans. How to kill Voldemort. How to get home. When he heard the door open and people begin to shuffle around, he lay down in the unfamiliar sheets and willed sleep to come.

The darkness, along with the green velvet curtains, gave the impression of branches overhead. It reminded him of all those nights he fell asleep keeping watch outside the tent and woke up to the cold air and the stars.

He was still wearing the robes Dumbledore had made and he reached into them, taking out the pocket-watch. It was an unusual shape: the jagged glass of the face dug into his skin. He clutched his wand in one hand, the time-turner in the other, and hoped that maybe, by some miracle, things would be back to normal in the morning.

Staring into the blackness, sleep finally came. Harry dreamed of nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

Returning readers, welcome back! I missed you. I'm going to

upload the fic over the span of week so that more people who were reading the fic while it was taken down will see it has been reuploaded.

New readers, This is a completed fic, that I wrote from 2019-2021, and I really hope you will enjoy.

I was in a very bad place mentally when I took this fic down, which was for personal reasons that I won't delve into. I apologise again deeply for that. It pained me to delete this fic (and to delete, as well, all the amazing kudos and comments it had gathered over the years). It really felt like ripping away a huge part of my life. I appreciate all the love and support this fic gathered in the past, and I thank you once again from the bottom of my heart.

On a brighter note, I have a new fic I am excited to share with you (Tomarry, of course), and I hope to post it sometime in the future when life isn't so hectic.

Feel free to drop a comment or kudo and - of course - to tell my your thoughts. :)

A Trip with Dumbledore

Harry woke to greenish light. His hand was still clutching his wand - the other one clenched around the time-turner. When he opened it out, the skin was red and cut from where shards of glass had dug in. He fumbled around in the half-light, found his mokeskin pouch and put the pocket-watch in it with his other trinkets.

He sat up.

The only noise from the room was soft breathing. Harry listened until his heart calmed down. He may be stuck here but at least it was Hogwarts. And there *was* Voldemort, but he had no reason to kill Harry here.

In theory, it was simple. Stay out of the way.

Find the diary.

Fix the time-turner and go back.

Kill him.

Harry pulled open the heavy curtains and light streamed into the four-poster. He squinted in sudden blindness, groping around for his glasses before realising they were on his face.

The Slytherin bed didn't creak the way his Gryffindor one had and he managed to tiptoe out of it without anyone stirring. He was desperate to leave, but equally so to use the toilet. He settled for the latter. In the half-light of the morning, he managed to find the door. Passing dangerously close to Abraxas Malfoy's bed, he pulled it open, wincing at the sound.

Stone walls, gleaming. Two cubicles, a claw-foot bath behind a wall. A mirror with a snake twisted around it, and several sinks.

Harry moved closer to the mirror. It was disturbingly realistic, in the way magical objects could be. It seemed to *writhe*, scales glimmering with a blue sheen. An urge came over him to speak Parseltongue. It was only an old mirror. Probably nothing. Yet he wanted.

'You're a new face, dear,' the mirror said.

Harry sprung away from the sink.

‘You look tired. You should fix that hair.’

Harry’s hands immediately jumped to it and he scowled. Why was he listening to the stupid thing anyway? ‘That doesn’t work,’ he said, and ran his hands though it more out of badness.

The mirror seemed to huff. ‘Well, suit yourself. And you should straighten that robe too!’

He finished in the bathroom and went down to the Common Room, which was thankfully empty. The stillness was more unnerving that the crowds had been last night, the whole room like some underwater dungeon. But he had to admit the windows were interesting. Brighter, in the morning light, he saw a piece of algae float past and disappear from sight.

Out of the Common Room, and through the dungeons, his feet guided him to the Great Hall.

He was half expecting Ron and Hermione but the Hall was almost empty. There were two students sitting at the Hufflepuff Table, one girl spooning porridge into her mouth in a zoned out, robotic fashion. No-one was up in Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. But at Slytherin – Harry’s stomach rolled unpleasantly – was the boy who had questioned him at supper.

Harry squared his shoulders and went forward, sitting down a good distance away. He reached for the toast – sausages and bacon weren’t served until later – and grabbed several slices. He was just buttering them when the Slytherin boy – Edwin, wasn’t it? – rose from the table and sat right across from him.

He had a funny face taken up by a large nose. His eyes were too big, his mouth a little thin line, like a frog. ‘Early,’ he remarked, those eerie eyes staring right at him. Then he glanced down at Harry’s plate. ‘What are you – starved?’

You wouldn’t know the half of it.

‘Food’s good here.’ Harry took a large bite and the boy winced.

‘I’m Edwin Rosier,’ he said, smiling tightly. ‘You’re . . . Harry Potter, right?’

‘That’s me.’

‘You managed to find your way to the Hall alright. It’s easy to get lost.’

‘Oh, I asked a ghost,’ Harry lied. ‘That one covered in blood.’

Edwin didn’t even try to disguise his distaste. ‘That’s the Bloody Baron. The ghost of Slytherin.’

Harry popped a piece of toast into his mouth. ‘*Cool.’*

He hummed. ‘Potter. There’s never been a Potter in Slytherin before. You *are* related to the Wizarding Family? You’re pureblood?’

‘Actually, no,’ Harry said. ‘Half-goblin. Yourself?’

Edwin made a sputtering noise and for one moment, Harry thought he was going to choke. His hope was in vain because Edwin regained himself one moment later, though his face was very red. ‘You think you’re funny.’

The politeness had vanished and what remained was cold. ‘With no respect for our school. You’ll see, *Harry*. Things won’t be half as amusing here as you think.’ He stood up so that he towered over a sitting Harry. ‘You may have fled from Grindelwald but there won’t be any hiding here.’

Then he walked away.

Although he wasn’t intimidating, Rosier’s words had left Harry no longer hungry. He mindlessly sipped his tea, looking around the Hall and wishing more than anything that Ron and Hermione would wake up.

What he got was almost as good.

Dumbledore entered the Hall – his red robes and auburn beard making him look like Fawkes in the prime of his life. Instead of going to the Head Table, he made his way straight over to Harry.

‘Excellent.’ He sat down in Rosier’s empty seat. ‘I was just out for a stroll around the Lake. It does wonderful things to the mind.’ He poured tea, added a generous amount of milk and sugar, and let out a sigh as he tasted it.

‘How is Slytherin treating you, Harry?’

‘Awful. I’m sharing a dorm with Voldemort and Rosier just asked me if

I'm a pureblood.'

Dumbledore frowned but it wasn't at his bluntness. 'You would do well to distinguish between Tom now and the man of your future.'

'He's a murderer.'

'We'll deal with Mr Riddle, Harry. But for now, you have to look on the bright side. I was thinking you, Mr Weasley, Ms. Granger and I could take a trip into Diagon Alley. Those transfigured robes won't last forever.'

Harry's heart soared. 'We don't have any money. Well, here we don't. But I could get a job – in the Leaky Cauldron, or something –'

'Do you think you're the first students who haven't been able to afford their school supplies? Hogwarts has a fund – your books may not be brand-new but you will most certainly have them.'

'Perfect. Sir, we'll pay you back. I promise.'

'Enough silly business. We will leave when Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger join us.'

'I wouldn't count on Ron getting up until at least twelve,' Harry said.

Professor Dumbledore only smiled in response.

'Sir,' Harry began, as a thought occurred to him. 'Our wands—well, me and Hermione's— got destroyed.'

He took Malfoy's wand out from his pocket and showed him. 'This belonged to a Death Eater. It's not really a match. Hermione's is worse. It doesn't work at all. But our wands haven't been broken here. If they're already made –'

'We can go to Ollivanders too,' Dumbledore said. 'But it could be that the wands simply don't exist yet.'

Harry couldn't hide his disappointment. 'Your phoenix, Fawkes,' he said. 'Did he give off two tail-feathers?'

Dumbledore smiled. 'You're in luck, Harry. He did, in fact. About ten years ago.'

Harry let out a breath he had been holding. His face broke into a grin. *'Perfect.'*

He didn't even care that it was the brother wand to Voldemort. Because it was *his* wand, it was part of him. Oh, how had he missed it. It was like he had lost an arm.

Dumbledore told him about lessons and the teachers and the research he was going to do on Time-Travel. 'I am going to have to order books. Or perhaps pay a visit to a dear friend. Going into the future's not very well heard of, I'm afraid.'

Harry's face fell.

'Nothing's impossible, Harry. I thought your trip here would have proved that, no?'

The Hall began to fill up and Dumbledore stood to join the Staff table. All at once, the Slytherins entered the Hall. Harry spotted Rosier again, who scowled at him. And behind the flock of Slytherins were two heads, one bright ginger, the other bushy brown.

Harry had never been so relieved in his life.

'Slytherin,' he said, when he made his way over to them. 'Can you believe it?'

'I don't really see it,' Hermione admitted.

'Me neither,' Ron agreed. 'All those Death Eaters - and You-Know-Who himself. Which one is he anyway?'

Harry stared. Hermione, too, had a puzzled look on her face, like she wasn't quite sure.

'You've never seen him before,' Harry realised. He laughed. 'You're in for a treat.'

Hermione didn't find it funny. 'You have to be careful, ok? Now you're a Slytherin, it's worse. Just try and ignore him. Please, Harry. Don't do anything reckless.'

Ron snorted. 'Our Harry? Reckless?'

'I've never heard of that word,' Harry said, beginning to grin.

Hermione scowled, shifting from foot to foot. 'Let's go into the Hall. Instead of just standing here.'

They moved through the crowds of students.

‘Gryffindor’s alright,’ Ron said. ‘My dorm at least. There’s Joseph Corner – nicer than the one in our year was. Albert Bones and Ignatius Prewett. *Prewett* . That’s mum’s uncle!’

‘The girls are nice as well,’ Hermione said. ‘Nia Shafiq’s Head-Girl. And then there’s Barbara Longbottom. She doesn’t look anything like Neville.’

‘I have Abraxas *Malfoy,’* Harry said, and Ron wrinkled up his nose. ‘He doesn’t seem as bad as our Malfoy though.’

‘Our Malfoy?’ Ron repeated. ‘That’s a bit disturbing.’

Harry told them about Dumbledore and how they were going into Diagon Alley.

Hermione froze. They had just reached the Gryffindor Table, and she spun around, her face pale. ‘That’s right. We have *NEWTS!’*

‘They won’t matter though. When we go back.’

‘Then they’ll be practice. Not some excuse to slack off.’

Harry and Ron shared a look.

‘Think of it this way then. They’re preparation. For when we go back. The more magic we know the better.’

Her face was set and there was silence as they let it sink in. Then a voice at the Gryffindor table called, 'Ron? Over here.' It was a tall guy with curly ginger hair and glasses. By the way Ron’s face lit up, Harry knew that this was Ignatius Prewett.

'I better go back to the Slytherins,' Harry said to Hermione. 'I don't want to do anything suspicious.'

When he reached the table, all the talking stopped.

‘Sleep well?’ one of the girls said, making room on the bench.

Harry sat down. ‘Not really.’

How was he meant to sleep in a room with Voldemort? How would he ever, when he could be killed at any moment?

Voldemort himself was sitting only seats away. Harry tried not to stare but he couldn’t help it. It was unnatural. The future Dark Lord sitting

there, eating breakfast. He looked as perfectly put-together as always, eerily so.

That, Harry thought, *is not human.*

‘I’m going into Diagon Alley with Dumbledore later,’ he said, ending the silence. ‘To get school supplies.’

The girl hummed. She had a small, delicate face, with pale eyebrows and eyelashes. Her blonde hair was tied back in a braid.

'Home-schooling. What was that like?'

'Different to this,' Harry said, and looked down. 'Very different.'

She made a noise of sympathy. 'You'll settle in. Slytherin - we're a family. Of sorts.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'It means - 'She moved forward slightly so Harry was looking right at her. 'We protect each other. And we're close. Disagreement though - '

‘Are easily sorted, Belinda,’ Voldemort cut in. 'Like a family.'

He smiled, in a way that would have been charming if it was anyone else. Instead it was an act. A perfect act.

How long had he practiced that smile until he got it just right?

'Tell us about yourself, Harry.'

'I didn't know my parents. They died. So I was brought up with the Weasleys - they took me in.'

'And then Grindelwald - 'Belinda winced. 'I'm sorry. That's rude.'

Harry stared down at his knees.The irony of the situation couldn’t be more apparent. Here he was, lying just like a Slytherin.

‘So you didn’t know your parents.’

Harry looked up. A small, skinny boy with dark skin and eyes was talking to him. ‘You're a halfblood?’

Rosier gave an ugly laugh from down the table. ‘Told me he’s half-goblin.’

The girl from the night before who reminded him of Sirius – Lucretia Black – laughed as well. It was a mocking sound that made Rosier flush. ‘Clearly, you’re an idiot,’ she said. ‘Does he look half-goblin to you? Have you not seen a goblin? They’re small and ugly.’

Harry’s eyebrows raised.

‘That’s Potter hair,’ she finished. ‘And bone-structure.’

‘My mum was muggleborn,’ Harry said awkwardly. He didn’t know what he was expecting - maybe for her to recoil in disgust. But there was no reaction. Any displeasure she had - that any of them did - was carefully hidden.

‘If you need a hand in lessons,’ Voldemort said, ‘I’d be happy to help.’

‘I’m sure I’ll be fine,’ Harry said. It came out cooler than he intended. ‘But - er- thanks.’

His face didn’t change. ‘Of course. Whatever you want.’

I want you dead, you disgusting soulless—

Harry’s eyes dropped to the table. Legilimency.

He could *not* look Voldemort in the eye. What if he saw the future? Saw *himself* ?

The thought was enough to make Harry’s heart race. What could only have been half an hour stretched on forever. The Slytherins asked him a few more questions - the blonde girl, Belinda, had a strange edge to her voice, like she was trying not to grind her teeth at his vagueness. When he looked up at the Head Table, Dumbledore gave a nod.

They both stood up.

‘I gotta go,’ he said, trying not to look as relieved as he felt.

He hurried away, wiping his sweaty hands on his robes. He met Ron, Hermione and Dumbledore at the Hall doors.

'Were you being questioned as well?' Hermione said. 'It's awful. You think the way our parents supposedly *died* would give people some tact.'

'They're used to death,' Ron said. 'It's 1944. Grindelwald is still in power.'

'And it's World War Two,' Hermione said. Her face brightened. 'But that will be ending soon! Thank god!'

Ron glanced at Dumbledore. 'So will the wizarding war,' he said.

They walked out of the castle and down the leaf-strewn path. Harry spotted Hagrid's hut.

‘We need to prove it wasn't him,' he said. 'An Acromantula can't petrify people. And Myrtle - she can testify. She saw yellow eyes.'

'Do you remember Buckbeak?' said Ron. 'Trust me, they're not going to want to start digging that case up again.'

‘Yes,' Hermione agreed and her mouth twisted up into a bitter smile. 'Especially over a muggleborn.'

They reached Hogsmeade in a short space of time. There were none of the shops Harry remembered.The streets were lined with stalls, selling all sorts of objects. They passed one selling fried Hippogriff wings and another with charmed spider eyes - *Add to any potion and keep it fresh for two months.*

They had to tear Hermione away from a bookstore - *but Harry, that book's practically extinct now!* - and he and Ron spent several long moments gazing at Quidditch gear.

‘The best broom on the market right now's the Cleansweep 4,' Ron said. 'Even I haven't rode that. It barely bloody *moves.'*

'No firebolts then,' Harry said sadly. 'Unless we invent one.'

That got Ron explaining exactly how you created a broomstick and Harry didn't notice they had reached the top of the street until Dumbledore was guiding them into a dimly-lit pub and asking to use the Floo.

‘No Knockturn Alley this time,’ Ron joked.

‘I was *twelve.’*

When it was Harry’s turn, he said ‘Diagon Alley’ so clearly Ron and Hermione laughed. It was the last thing he saw before green flames swallowed him up and he was falling headfirst out of the fire.

‘Oh, dear,’ Dumbledore said, reaching out his hand.

Harry took it and brushed away the soot on his robes. ‘You can’t tell them,’ he said immediately and Dumbledore’s lips twitched.

‘Now, Harry, even the most respectable wizards have trouble with the Floo.’ His own robes, however, didn’t have any soot on them.

The fireplace flared back up and Hermione came through. Ron followed a moment later, took one look at Harry’s dirty robes and started to laugh.

They left the pub and went into the street. Unlike Hogsmeade, Diagon Alley was the same as ever. It was like it had been before Voldemort’s return – shop windows bright and bold, hundreds of people chatting as they bustled about. Harry stood there for a moment, drinking it in before Ron gave him a nudge.

‘You ok?’

People walked past them without a second glance. A little girl was carrying a toy broom.

‘Yes. I just—' He waved his hand at the street around.

Ron’s expression softened. 'Nice, isn’t it? Seeing it like this?’

‘This is how it should be.’

They didn’t go into any of the usual shops for books. Dumbledore led them to a store called *Abbott’s Attic,* with a little bell that chimed when they stepped inside. The light streaming in the windows illuminated the inside. There were tables overflowing with objects, shelves crammed with old books and racks covered in clothes. Dust sparkled like glitter in the air.

A young witch came out from the back of the shop. She was carrying a pile of neatly folded clothes and dropped them on the only empty table in the shop. ‘Albus,’ she said, ducking her head so that her hair obscured her pink cheeks. ‘I didn’t think I’d be seeing you so soon.’

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione and they all grinned.

Dumbledore gave her a pleasant smile and told her what they were there for. Still blushing, she hurried to the other side of the shop and three sets of books floated over.

Next were cauldrons, and though a bit dirty, they looked the same as

any Harry had seen. Finally, she fitted them for robes. Harry and Ron's shoes peaked out the bottom but Dumbledore extended them with a casual flick of his wand.

Harry winced when she told them the price. He was feeling terrible about the wand and decided he didn't need one anymore. Only Hermione truly did, who couldn't even get sparks from Bellatrix's.

'Nonsense,' said Dumbledore. 'A wand is the most important object a witch or wizard owns. It would go against my job and our school policy if you continued using an incorrect one.'

Harry still felt horribly guilty as they stepped inside Ollivanders. It was dark and the shelves loomed like black shadows. Ron sat down on the rickety chair but got back up again when it creaked. They waited there in the dark for several moments before a man came out.

He was not the Ollivander Harry knew. The eyes were the same —pale and clear, so light they seemed colourless— but that was where the similarity ended. He had dark hair tied back and a strong, square face.

'Albus,' he said. 'Your wand is still working well?'

'Perfectly. Sometimes I think it knows me better than myself.'

'Good, good. Who needs the wand then?'

Harry and Hermione stepped forward.

'*Both* of you? Whatever happened the last?'

'They got damaged. Hit by spells.'

Ollivander's eyes twitched.

'It was an attack,' Hermione said hastily. 'Grindelwald. We tried to fix them —'

'Wands typically can't be fixed. They're delicate magic, each one taking a year—maybe more—to make.''

He waved his wand and a measuring tape sprung into the air. 'Ok, Miss . . .'

'Granger.'

'Miss Granger. Wand hand?'

‘Right.’

She stepped forward. Ollivander took down several boxes.

‘My last one was vine wood,’ she said.

‘Gregorovick’s creation?’

‘Yes.’

The measuring tape crumbled to the ground. He handed Hermione a wand and she waved it through the air. ‘No. No way.’

Another. Another. Harry shuffled from foot to foot. What if it wasn’t made yet?

‘Ten and three-quarter inches. Vine wood and dragon-heart string. Loyal.’

When she picked up the wand, there was a piercing noise, like a shout. Purple light flooded out, filling the room in clouds of lilac mist.

‘*Perfect* ,’ Hermione breathed.

‘I made that wand only last year.’

Hermione’s hand was wrapped around it protectively, and Harry thought it would be impossible to take it from her now.

‘Try a spell, if you like.’

Hermione took a moment, then said: ‘*Avis*.’

A dozen tiny birds shot from the tip of it; songbirds, blue and red and yellow, that zoomed around the shop. Harry saw Ron take an instinctive step back, but they didn’t go near him. The twittering died down and eventually they disappeared from sight.

‘Alright, Mr -’

‘Potter.’

Ollivander stopped.

‘You look awfully like Fleamont Potter. A relative, perhaps?’

Fleamont Potter. Who was that? His *granddad* ?

‘Yeah. A - cousin.’

Ollivander handed him a wand, smooth and perfectly polished. When his fingers touched it, green sparks shot out and it heated up so much that Harry let go.

‘Not unicorn hair then.’

More boxes came down.

‘Try phoenix feathers,’ Harry said. ‘And Holly. That was my last one.’

’Holly and Phoenix feathers? That’s a very unusual combination.’

He handed Harry another wand. Nothing happened when he picked it up but pleasant tingles ran up his arm.

‘Made with the finest Japanese holly. No? Perhaps something more common.’

Harry tried one more Holly wand - it felt so nice in his hand he was reluctant to give it back. Ollivander turned to Dumbledore.

‘Maybe with the feather from your own Phoenix? Only seven years ago, I sold its pair. I didn’t think I’d be selling the other so soon.’

Harry frowned and Ollivander gazed at his face. It was unnerving, those pale eyes lingering on his scar. As he opened a final box, he spoke, staring Harry straight in the eyes, unblinking.

‘Just seven years, a boy came into this store and chose a Yew wand, thirteen and a half inches. The feather inside it came from a Phoenix, which only gave one more feather. He would be— ‘he stopped before saying the name. ‘In his final year of Hogwarts. Like you.’

Harry picked up his wand - his very own wand - tentatively.

Immediately, he felt warm. A rush of gentle air filled his entire body. In his hand - it felt *right*. He waved the wand through the air and white light flooded out. It merged together, like a thick, shimmery curtain.

Expecto Patronum.

Harry saw Ron and Hermione’s laughing faces from earlier, and the smoke began to take shape.

Prongs galloped through the air, lighting up the dusty room with ghostly light. He trotted circles around Dumbledore; nuzzled Ron and Hermione with his pearly head and finally faded into the air.

Harry felt like he was floating on a cloud of contentment. He ran his finger over the little ridges in the wood.

Ollivander's eyes were unnaturally bright. 'Harry Potter,' he said, his voice soft. 'That wand was waiting for you.'

He charged Dumbledore six galleons each, saying the wands were a pleasure to sell.

Down the street they went, to a few more shops, including the apothecary and a store selling ink and parchment.

It had begun to drizzle when they returned to Hogsmeade, and Harry's hair was plastered to his head before he remembered to use his wand.

The paths leading to the castle were muddy from the downpour. When they reached the castle, the smell of lunch wafted from the Great Hall and Harry's stomach grumbled.

'Let's change,' Hermione said. Her hair had inflated, like a big, fluffy cloud. 'And meet back here.'

Dumbledore gave them each their stuff and Harry made his way to the dungeons. The castle grew quieter the further down he went. His footsteps echoed.

'Parseltongue,' he said, when he had reached the entrance to the Common Room. The stone wall didn't budge.

Was he in the wrong place? All the grey stone looked identical. The long, dark corridors. It would be easy to get lost.

'Parseltongue,' he said again.

Except …

That wasn't the password at all.

'Serpent-tongue.'

The brick began to creak and crumble as it stretched at both sides. Harry let out a breath and climbed through the gap. His trainers squelched with every step across the empty Common Room. He

hurried to the seventh years boys' dorm – pulled open the door –

And was greeted with Voldemort's surprised face.

His eyes swept over Harry who looked away. He was frozen in the doorway; could do nothing more than stand there, stunned. Voldemort didn't move from where he stood and Harry swallowed.

They were close in height, though Voldemort had a way of standing which made him appear far taller. He *seemed* a lot taller.

Harry much preferred to stare down at Voldemort's shiny shoes – and his own muddy ones – than have to look up and be level with those eyes.

'Did you have a nice swim?' Voldemort said.

Harry glanced up and then away. He had to bite his lip to not retort and he dug his fingers into his palms to resist taking his wand out.

Don't act suspicious. Don't give yourself away.

'There's charms for that, you know. They make you waterproof.'

Harry didn't answer. In one moment, he moved forward, almost shoving Voldemort out of the way, and reached his four-poster. He dumped the supplies on it and spent a minute rummaging through them. He hoped Voldemort would have left when he turned around. But he was still standing there, watching.

'You don't like me, do you, Harry Potter?'

Harry's heart gave a great stuttering jump. 'I don't even know who you are.'

Voldemort frowned. 'I'm Tom Riddle.' He pointed at the bed beside Harry's. 'I sleep there. And will do so for the rest of the year.'

'Ok?'

'So, if we're going to be dorm-mates, perhaps we can be friends.'

Friends.

Harry wanted to laugh. Instead he made a strange, surprised noise that made Voldemort's eyebrows furrow together.

‘I like to keep to myself. After Grindelwald, I don’t really trust anyone.‘

Especially you.

‘Except those two Gryffindors.’

Harry couldn’t keep the venom from his voice. ‘They’re my *family.’*

He went into the bathroom, found a towel and rubbed it through his hair. Voldemort was still standing in the dormitory when he came out and his eyes lingered on Harry’s hair, which was standing up in all directions. They moved down, widened at his scar.

Harry flattened his hair down over his forehead.

‘You’re a Slytherin,’ Voldemort said, taking a step forward. ‘So there are a few things you should know about Slytherin house.’

‘And what are they?’

‘We are one. And as Head-Boy and Slytherin’s heir, the house follows me.’

Harry didn’t even pretend to look surprised at his revelation. ‘I just want to do my NEWTs. I don’t care what goes on here.’

Voldemort almost looked disappointed. Harry saw the moment the interest dimmed in his eyes.

‘You don’t care,’ he repeated. ‘About Hogwarts at all?’

‘It’s just a school isn’t it?’

His face darkened and Harry knew he had struck a nerve. ‘Is there any reason you were sorted here? In Slytherin? And not just . . . Gryffindor?’

‘I have ambition. I want to be a professional Quidditch player.’

Harry had ambition alright. He wanted to destroy every single horcrux there was and kill Voldemort once and for all.

‘Interesting. As Head Boy, if you do need help with anything, or get lost -’

‘I’ll ask.’

He eventually left. Harry held his breath until the door closed and then raced back into the bathroom, leaning over the sink and gripping the stone as hard as he could.

That's not Voldemort.

Bile was beginning to rise in his throat.

Not the one that killed your parents.

But Tom Riddle was still a monster, twisted into the body of a human.

Sirius' face came to his mind. Dumbledore, the moment before he fell from the astronomy tower and smashed like a china doll. Cedric.

Tom Riddle with his charming smile.

I'll help you with your school-work, Harry.

He had killed Myrtle. He had killed his muggle family. He had made the diary horcrux.

Perhaps we can be friends.

Harry gave a great heave but nothing came up except a dry, raspy cough. He finally let go of the sink and stumbled back.

When he closed his eyes, Voldemort's flat, reptilian face and Tom Riddle's darkly handsome one merged together. Brown eyes that turned red, so red they seemed to *bleed.*

Bleed, bleed, bleed.

It's a mask. It's all a mask.

He would prove it.

That night, he lay awake, holding his wand like a child with a toy. Someone in the dorm was snoring, deep and rumbling. But from the bed beside Harry was nothing at all.

Does he fake sleep too?

He lay there for what must have been hours, wide awake. It seemed sleep would never come but it must have, eventually. Because he was in the Chamber, standing in a pool of cold, slimy water. The Basilisk stretched up into the air, green scales the same colour as the lights in the Common Room. He was small beneath it, and tried to look away.

But something was moving ahead, and against his will, he stared up into great, yellow eyes. But there was no phoenix this time. And no sword of Gryffindor.

Fickle Things, Friendships

Harry spent the weekend with Ron and Hermione, trying to dodge the Slytherins without being obvious about it. What was it Hermione would say? He had to try and *fit in.*

But it was difficult. In Slytherin, there were already so many secrets. He would come close and hear whispers that stopped abruptly. Words like 'mudblood' and 'Death-Eater' and mouths that would freeze when they spotted him, eyes wide and watchful.

He avoided Voldemort most of all, who didn't seek Harry out again. His interest had slipped. If only Harry kept doing what he was doing. Staying average and harmless and unnoticed.

Monday came in a flash. Harry had spent most of his time holed up in the library with Ron and Hermione trying to research time-travel. He found very little on the subject, and felt more than uncomfortable around the librarian's eyes. Now, he suddenly had classes and *N.E.W.Ts,* as Hermione liked to say.

'We have Defence together,' Ron said, comparing time-tables that Monday morning. 'And Potions. And Charms.'

But before they had all their classes together. Ron and Harry always had at least. Now —

There were spaces in Harry's new time-table which said: *Transfiguration - Slytherin and Hufflepuff* and *Herbology - Slytherin-Ravenclaw*.

The first class was Herbology. Harry followed the rest of the Slytherins to the Greenhouses, the bottom of his robes touching the muddy grass. It had rained all week and the grounds was marshy and wet. They were in Greenhouse Seven, which he had never entered before.

There was a flood of heat as they stepped inside. Harry took off his foggy glasses and wiped them on his robes. When he put them back on, everything came into focus.

Plants were growing from every inch of space. Plants that stretched the whole way to the ceiling, as thick as any tree. Vines that shuddered. Leaves opening and closing in breath. A long thorn

stretched down near Harry's head, and he ducked as it attempted to wrap around his head. The whole place hummed.

‘How did you do Herbology being home-schooled?’ Abraxas Malfoy asked. He looked out of place between all the plants, expensive robes and strange, pale features, like a swan on a chicken farm.

‘Badly. It was a lot of harmless things mainly, and they were always native. And lots of theory.’ He grimaced.

Abraxas nodded. ‘It’s flesh-eating trees this year. We’ve already started trying to strip a few.’

He pointed towards five dark trees at the back of the greenhouse. There were deep gashes running up the barks and a sticky green substance oozing out. The branches thrashed around, like angry windmills. Harry was too busy staring at the trees to notice the professor come in. He had an aged, weather-beaten face and bright silver hair groomed back.

‘We’ll continue leeching the trees today,’ he said. ‘Professor Slughorn is asking for the juice as soon as possible.’

He stopped, noticing Harry. ‘You’re the new one, aren’t you? We’re doing flesh-eating trees until October. There’s some notes you’ll want to catch up on.’

He turned to the rest of the class. ‘And you’ll want to get a mask.’

They put on their masks and dragon-hide gloves. Professor Beery went over the wand-movement to cut into the trees - that was definitely for Harry’s benefit. You had to stand exactly two metres away and constantly watch the branches. Not one inch of flesh could be shown.

Harry was uncomfortably hot in his mask. He felt a bit like an astronaut. Abraxas Malfoy lingered by his side and Harry didn’t move away. He wasn’t exactly confident with the trees and copied Abraxas, who extracted the venom in a way that seemed effortless.

His hands blistered through the thin dragonhide gloves—he felt a new sympathy for Ron, who had always used second-hand ones. The words *flesh-eating* came to mind more than once.

The next class was Transfiguration. Harry spirit fell at the thought of it - the precision and accuracy of the wand-work; the theory which

was confusing enough in sixth year. Seventh-year was going to be hell.

But then he remembered. He didn't have Professor McGonagall. He had *Dumbledore*. And all of a sudden, he was looking forward to it.

The Transfiguration classroom was expanded to double the size of the other classrooms but the back half of the room was empty. No desks, no chairs, only empty space. At the front was Dumbledore's desk - he was sitting behind a stack of essays - and a blackboard which took up the entire wall.

When Harry and the others came in - Hufflepuffs this time, none he recognised - Dumbledore smiled and stood up.

'Wonderful,' he said. 'We aren't going to need any books today. We're continuing with cross-species transfiguration and will perhaps attempt it non-verbally. I know, how horrible.'

He winked.

Cross-species Transfiguration.

Harry's wasn't the only face that fell. He knew if Hermione were here, she would perk right up. Ron would join in his misery. But they weren't so instead he stood there alone.

'I always whisper it,' Abraxas Malfoy said, coming up beside him. Well, perhaps not alone.

'And he knows. He gives me this stare.' Abraxas jerked his head, and sure enough, Dumbledore was looking in their direction. 'That one.'

Another boy came up beside them. He was small and skinny with dark skin and hair. There was nothing intimidating about him apart from his eyes. They were shifty, going from Harry to Abraxas and back again. He looked like he could be plotting murder at any moment.

Harry remembered him now. He was the boy who had asked if Harry was a halfblood.

'Potter, right?'

Harry nodded, though he suspected it was rhetorical. Who didn't know the new student's name?

‘Dumbledore doesn’t like us Slytherins, does he, Abraxas?’

Abraxas shook his head. ‘What Avery means is don’t be practicing any . . . unsavoury . . . magic under his eyes.’

‘And don’t call anyone a mudblood. There’s loads of them in here.’ Avery looked over at the Hufflepuffs and mimed throwing up.

'Well, maybe Dumbledore's right,' Harry said coldly.

Both Abraxas and Avery turned to stare at him. Abraxas’ eyes were large and baffled.

'You're disgusting, Potter,' Avery said, taking a step away. He glanced at Abraxas. ‘Of course you wouldn't make a good new member.'

'Harry has made it clear he doesn't want to join in house affairs,' Abraxas cut in. 'Haven't you, Harry?'

'He's a Slytherin now,' Avery said. 'What's he going to do - cover his ears?'

'Actually,' Harry said, ignoring the part of his brain saying *shut up, shut up, idiot.* 'A member of what exactly?'

Avery smiled, and it was more unnerving than when Voldemort had. He looked like a mixture of a man and a child; the sort of child who pulled the wings off flies for fun. There was something so unnerving about that expression, that for the first time, Harry thought, *maybe he's mad.*

'Just a little club. For Slytherins. It's like . . . a study group. If you want to be powerful.' He laughed. 'Really powerful and not dragged down by mudbloods and muggles. Only the very best join.'

'Sounds interesting. But what do you mean dragged down?'

'Do you really want to learn how to turn that desk into a pig? Or some stupid cleaning charm? Anything halfway important is banned. Dark magic. If you want power - *real* power - 'A greedy look came over his face. 'Then trust me you will have it.'

Harry's fingers itched on his wand. 'So, you would be like Grindelwald?’ He said slowly. ‘Who killed my whole family?'

'You wouldn't be scared of Grindelwald anymore. There would only be wizards - *pure-blood wizards* - ruling the world. You could be one of them.'

Harry's voice began to tremble in the effort to suppress his anger. 'No thanks. I'm not interested in Dark Lords and purebloods.'

He turned away from Avery and Abraxas and they didn't follow. He was breathing heavily and saw Avery's wild, half-mad face as he talked about ruling the world.

It's just a little club.

To learn magic.

'I will again warn you of the dangers of this magic.' Dumbledore's voice drifted from across the room. 'You don't want to be stuck with claws or a tail.' He waved his wand and mirrors appeared on the walls at the back of the room. A few students jumped when their reflections appeared.

'Find a space. Try and change your nails into claws. Picture it in your mind down to every detail. See it as though you believe it's there. Remember, the incantation is manuvem. If you get it good, you can move onto non-verbal.'

Fat chance of that. Harry remembered all the times in sixth year when he couldn't get his eyebrows to turn back, or his eyes to change colour.

'See it,' Dumbledore instructed.

A ghostly image of a clawed hand floated in the air. It looked like it belonged to a Hippogriff, with sharp, long talons

'See every little detail. Want it.'

Harry did not want claws of any sort – unless, of course, he could scratch out Voldemort's eyes.

'Manuvem.'

The wand-movement looked like a loopy letter L. Immediately,

Dumbledore's fingers changed, replaced with dark and scaly skin and claws that glittered.

There was noise as the entire class began to call the incantation. Harry wasn't seeing a lot of change and most of the Slytherins were standing there, watching the others. He had to resist finding Voldemort in the room but he couldn't help it.

Dumbledore was going around each of the students, complimenting them, correcting hand positions and pronunciation. He reached Voldemort, who was standing both with the Hufflepuffs and the Slytherins.

He never liked me as much as the other teachers did.

Dumbledore didn't show any distrust, despite knowing the truth. 'Very nice,' he said, to what was a flawless representation of what he himself had done.

When Harry tried, he got nothing except a sharp stinging in his nails. He copied a few things Dumbledore corrected with Lucretia Black and managed to get his nails long and pointed and a horrible, yellow colour.

Then he heard something that took Transfiguration right from his mind. 'Very nice, Mr Moody,' Dumbledore said. 'Creative design as well.'

Harry turned around. Dumbledore was talking to a boy with blue eyes and short blonde hair.

Moody.

Could it be?

'Good one, Alastor,' another boy said. He had brown hair, freckles and large eyes. They were both wearing Hufflepuff robes.

Harry felt cold. It was Mad-Eye alright. Young and unscarred, looking as ordinary as anyone else.

Did he dream of being an Auror? Catching dark wizards? He would get his wish.

But now he laughed, leaning in to say something to his friend. One day, he would be paranoid. Twitchy and suspicious, set off at loud noises. He would drink from only a hip-flash and check everything he ate.

He would grow up known as *'Mad-Eye'* Moody. Spend nearly a year locked in a trunk. A wooden leg and a magical eye.

Was it worth it?

Harry turned away from Moody and his friend, trying to block it from his mind. But for the rest of the class, he couldn't think of anything else.

'Mad-Eye a Hufflepuff,' Ron said, later that day in potions. 'And in the same year as bloody *You-Know-Who*.' He glanced around the room but the Slytherins were nowhere in earshot. Slughorn had yet to come in and the class was full of chatter. 'Do you think he knows?'

Harry thought of Moody's carefree face and shook his head.

'Honestly, how would he?' Hermione said. She tilted her head over at Voldemort, who was making Belinda Lestrange laugh. They had matching grins on their faces.

'There's no evidence. He has everyone in his pocket.' She lowered her voice. 'And can you please stop calling him Voldemort, Harry? You're going to slip up and someone will hear.'

'But he is Voldemort.'

'And you're not going to forget anytime soon. He's dangerous, yes, but he's Tom Riddle. What will happen if he overhears us?'

She had a point.

'Ok. Tom Riddle.'

He had never liked that muggle name anyway.

Harry carefully looked over at the Slytherins, none who were looking their way. His heart was beginning to thud. ‘What would happen if we killed him?’

Hermione’s face darkened and she opened her mouth to begin a *you’re-the-most-stupid-boy-ever* speech.

‘Or at least destroyed the diary. That way the chamber wouldn’t open in our time. Ginny – ‘

Her warm eyes when she winked at him; the dimples in her cheeks. Her loud infectious laughter filling the room.

‘–Wouldn’t be possessed for a year.’

‘If we kill him, we’d be saving thousands of lives,’ Ron said. ‘Tom would have a little fall over the Astronomy Tower, and half the Wizarding World would be saved. The Order, mum’s brothers, Harry’s parents, the muggles . . . ‘

‘And we could end up not even born!’ Hermione was ready to continue, her eyes blazing, when Slughorn walked in.

He smiled at them, but his eyes lingered on the Slytherins up the front.

'It's a practical lesson today,' he said. 'On everlasting elixirs. But first we need to discuss the Independent Project.’ Slughorn was pacing around the students, looking far more excited than any of them.

‘*What* independent project?’ Ron muttered.

‘The Ministry have updated the Potion’s NEWT. As well as a written exam and a practical, there’s a new project. We’re the first year trying it. Create and research a potion to showcase your ability. It can be anything fancy, or a modification of a recipe to show off your knowledge of reactants and creativity.’

‘Have a think about what you’d like to do. Come up with some ideas to discuss next class. Now . . . ‘He cleared his throat and the talking stopped. 'We're going to continue with Everlasting Elixirs. You’ll have made the Draught of Peace in fifth year – a very finicky little potion – and today, attempt to change some of the reactants to make it everlasting.’

‘We discussed this on Friday. Page forty-two of your textbooks will help.’

It was the same textbook Harry had owned in sixth year, but of course this one didn’t have any of Snape’s notes. There was a brown stain down the page with the recipe and someone had doodled dicks in the margins.

The potion was a disaster. He didn’t know if it was because he had spent so long on the run, not touching a cauldron. But it was a strange, brown colour, and bubbling furiously. Ron's potion was the green shown in the book but it was beginning to hiss, spits of liquid flying out.

'Fuck. Er . . . Hermione?'

Hermione's face was slick with sweat, her sleeves rolled up as she stirred. 'Add in nettles leaves. Or something. I don't know, Ron!'

'Ten minutes left,' Slughorn called. 'No homework for the best potion.'

Harry's potion was a murky brown. He stirred it absently, too busy watching Voldemort - no, *Tom Riddle* - to bother trying to salvage it. He was helping a girl with her potion, whispering something in her ear. Even from this distance, he saw her giggle, her cheeks turning pink as he leaned in.

'Ravenclaw,' Ron said, following his gaze. 'She was in Transfiguration this morning. Elena Fawley.'

'And?' said Hermione, not looking away from her potion.

'Her dad was the Minister for Magic. And during the first war, the Fawley's were neutral. Powerful family, but no help to the Order.’

Harry watched Tom Riddle with a horrid sort of fascination. The pearly smile, the whispers. He was certainly different to the Voldemort he had known.

'So, he got to her,’ he said. ‘Got to most of the wizarding families. And convinced them of his cause.'

Hermione looked torn, her fingers running through the ends of her

hair. She had turned away from her potion, though it was almost identical to what it should be.

'I'm not saying you're right,' she finally said. 'Because messing with the laws of time is *deadly*. But us being here already goes against everything I've read. If we altered things a tiny bit . . . '

'We kill him,' Harry said.

'A *tiny bit.*' She glared. 'Nothing that extreme. I mean it, Harry. We can't kill him. We can just . . . show people that he isn't all he appears.'

Harry went back to the Common Room that night feeling lighter than ever. Hermione may not agree with what he planned but she did want to expose Riddle. And having her and Ron on his side was better than anything. He entered the Common Room, greeted by the flood of green.

'Harry!' Lucretia Black called. 'Want to join?'

He hesitated. She was sitting with some of the other seventh years by the fire. Homework littered the tables. But then Harry spotted Tom Riddle amongst them and his stomach turned.

'I can't,' he lied. 'I'm gonna have a —er— bath.'

He spun around before she said anything else.

A *bath.*

Well done, Harry. You're a liar in the making.

He reached the boys dormitory and pulled the door open. Empty.

Sighing in relief, he flopped down on his four-poster bed and closed his eyes. Then the door opened and he scrambled up.

It wasn't Riddle. Abraxas' uncertain face came into view.

'I know we disagreed earlier,' he said. 'About a somewhat . . .

controversial topic.'

'That's one way of putting it,' Harry said.

'So, I apologise. If I made you uncomfortable. I see no reason to fall out over some different views.'

Harry blinked. 'Really?'

'I don't see any reason why not.'

Harry bit his lip. Abraxas would become a Death Eater, there was no doubt about it. He would one day father Lucius Malfoy. But he had also followed Harry up here. Had made an effort to be nice to him since he arrived.

And even if Hermione said to fit in, a part of Harry *wanted* to.

'Why do you want to be friends anyway?' Harry said. 'It will only cause you hassle.'

Abraxas laughed. It was a very soft sound, unlike the loud laughter most of his friends had. 'Those two Gryffindors. I've seen you with them. You're so close. So loyal. You'd do anything for them, wouldn't you?'

'They're my family,' he agreed.

Abraxas smiled. 'I've never had someone like that. And I know you're new, Harry, but . . . I can tell you're a good friend.'

Harry opened his mouth but no words came out.

I got them stuck back here, he thought. *I've almost gotten them killed so many times.*

'And the other Slytherin boys,' Abraxas continued. 'We're close. But it isn't friendship.'

He stuck out his hand. Harry stared at it, his mind going back to the train in first year. Another Malfoy, displaying confidence that only a child who had gotten everything in life had. Second passed and Abraxas' expression slipped.

Without another thought, Harry reached forward and shook his hand.

Like an Inferno

Chapter Notes

> Update: I know Jk Rowling said that Death Eaters went by the name the ‘Knights of Walpurgis’ during Tom’s schooldays but I don’t really like the name so I’ve decided to not use it (if you want, you can imagine they changed their name in seventh year). When it comes to canon not stated in the books, I sometimes pick and choose.

He wanted to visit the chamber again. To feel power rushing through his fingers, like wind on an autumn day. To have the air strum, heavy. To breathe it in. To fill his lungs like oxygen; like poison. He wanted, he *craved.*

It was never enough.

There were books on Dark Magic in the Chamber. Books about the castle. Tom had read all of them in his fifth-year, memorised them, but even that wasn’t enough. He went down at least once a month to practice. None of the castle’s protective spells worked there and nothing stopped him doing any sort of magic he wished.

But this week, he didn't chance it. Something about the new students was off. They had survived Grindelwald. Tom knew horrors as well as anyone, but they were almost *too* distrusting.

Harry Potter's eyes were too suspicious - too intensely watchful - for him to brush off. And wherever Tom went, Potter disappeared. He would stay out of the Common Room all day; sit at the opposite side of the Hall at lunch. It was quite impossible for Tom to catch him again, after that day in the dormitory.

I don't care what goes on in the House.

I don't even know you.

Liar.

The only one in the House with any luck was Abraxas. Tom didn't know how *that* had happened, but the boy had a persistent quality that grew on people.

'He doesn't mention you,' Abraxas said. 'He made it clear he doesn't

want to be involved in . . . our little group.'

'He's a blood-traitor,' Tom agreed. 'And his performance in class isn't anything extraordinary.'

'Exactly. So why are you worrying about him?'

'I'm not worrying,' Tom replied. 'He interests me.'

‘Oh?’

‘He’s a liar. He’s come to Hogwarts and never once has he gotten lost. He keeps to himself to the point of obsession. Do you notice that? His bias against Slytherin House despite everyone being polite?’

Abraxas frowned. ‘I think he’s a light wizard,’ he said. ‘And Avery and Rosier weren’t friendly. What I *don’t* know is how he was sorted here.’

Tom’s lips curled. ‘He mentioned something about a Quidditch ambition.’

‘Quidditch?’

Abraxas seemed to light up. ‘He never told me that. We could do with a few new players on the team.’

‘See if he’s any good. If this Quidditch hope has any truth in it.’ Tom stood up. ‘Abraxas?’

‘Yes?’

‘Good job. You’ve behaved far better than Avery and Rosier with their ignorance. You have been subtle and trustworthy, like a Slytherin should be.’

He missed the strange expression that crossed Abraxas’ face.

‘I’m impressed.’

It was half-past seven and everyone was at dinner. Harry stood in the dormitory, adrenaline coursing through every nerve in his body. At any moment, the doors could burst open. Locking charms didn’t work

in the dorms, something he had found out years ago. He hovered there, uncertain, then walked briskly over to Riddle's bed and pulled the curtains back.

Would he notice? It would be just like Riddle to have them pulled a certain way.

It felt wrong standing there, not as sinister as he imagined. This was where Voldemort slept.

Slept.

Even that was wrong; such a humane act, sleeping. The Voldemort of the future probably didn't need to sleep. He probably used rituals and spells to prevent it; to become something that wasn't human at all but simply existed.

Harry put his hand under the pillow, feeling around. The sheet was smooth and cold, but there was nothing there. He held his breath.

Was that the door? But the only sound was his heart, thumping in his ears.

He carefully felt the duvet but there was nothing there. He moved to the nightstand. No clock. A book – *Charms of Defence and Deterrence* – that looked battered. More books in the drawers and clothes folded neatly.

Harry closed them. He felt like a robber creeping around a house at night, trying not to leave evidence. Finally, the trunk . . .

He hesitated for a second – could he really?

He'll know.

He won't.

Finally, he bent to open it. It didn't budge. It was an ordinary metal lock, not stiff or rusted. Harry immediately stepped away, thinking the trunk would explode like a bomb.

It didn't. Only stood there, looking as innocent and non-threatening as any other. The *diary* was in that trunk.

Harry blew out a defeated breath. This made things a lot harder.

What if Riddle didn't have the diary anymore? What if it was hidden

in a vault somewhere? Given to one of the Death Eaters? But it was his Horcrux. Half his soul. He would keep it safe.

Harry pulled the curtains closed, took one last look at Riddle's bed, and made his way into the Common Room. His heart didn't stop beating for quite a while.

Lessons consumed most of the day and in some ways, Hogwarts was just the same as it had been before. In others, not so much.

The professors were different. The course-work significantly harder. Professor Dumbledore teaching Transfiguration was one of those things Harry came to love. It was becoming one of his favourite subjects and trying to impress Dumbledore - who explained things in the way that was clear and memorable - had made his marks shoot up.

On Wednesday afternoon, Slytherin had Defence Against the Dark Arts with Gryffindor.

Professor Merrythought had to be the oldest teacher Harry had ever seen.

Her hair was entirely white, and she wore strange, brown robes that looked like a muggle suit. When she came close to him, there was that overwhelming scent of musky perfume - it reminded Harry of Mrs. Figgs.

But immediately, he knew that she wasn't a professor you wanted to cross. Like an animal, she had gotten irate and sharp in old age.

On the first day she taught them, she bombarded Harry, Ron and Hermione with questions.

You're up to scratch with the sixth-year material I take it?

Capable of being in a NEWT level class?

Ever been in a duel before?

They answered until she was satisfied then sat down in the seats with the rest of the students.

‘Today, we’re dealing with giants.’

She glanced at Harry, Ron and Hermione.

‘Not physically of course. And why is that?’

‘They’re virtually spell-resistant,’ Hermione said. After a split-second she continued. ‘And from twenty to twenty-five feet tall. Giants also live in tribes and aren’t caught alone.’

Professor Merrythought hummed.

‘Exactly. But say you *did* encounter one, all alone in the mountains, not researching your surroundings. What would you do?’

There was silence. She rounded on him suddenly. ‘Mr Potter? Any ideas?’

Harry’s neck grew hot as everyone turned to look at him. ‘I suppose I’d try and reason with it. With a gift. They’re pretty intelligent.’

’Near human-intelligence,’ she agreed. ‘And when that didn’t work? No apparating away now. Pretend that didn’t occur to you.’

Harry frowned in thought. An image of Grawp came into his head, chained in the forest.

‘Their eyes are weak,’ he said. ‘So I’d use the Conjunctivitis Curse. And when it’s blind, I’d transfigured the ground under it. Into ice. So it would be blind and slipping and I’d stun it. Or chain it up. Or—’

He stopped. ‘Run away.’

Professor Merrythought smiled. ‘That’s the wisest solution, isn’t it? Of course, giants are fast, so yours would have to be suitably slowed. The Conjunctivitis curse is completely correct. Where did you learn that?’

‘I read it in a book about dragons,’ he lied. ‘And thought the same would apply.’

‘Good, good. Five points to Slytherin.’

For the first half of the class they took down notes. Harry’s mind was beginning to wander and Ron had started to yawn every couple of minutes. The rest of the class seemed to be sharing their boredom.

‘We’re going to practice some magic now,’ Professor Merrythought

said.

Harry perked up.

‘Wands out, chairs pushed in. Help me move them to the back please.’

They floated the chairs and tables to the back of the room and Professor Merrythought left the classroom. When she came back, a dozen dummies hovered behind her. The dummies looked like a mixture of shop mannequins and toy dolls. They were sewed messily, thread stretching like gashes up their fabric faces.

‘Try and hit the dummy with as many spells as you can. Get it down to the ground. Prevent it from attacking you.’

She levitated a dummy towards each of them. 'Now, on three. Two . . . '

The dummies sprang to life. Harry heard someone let out a yell and then the air was lit up with spells.

The dummy in front of him leapt forward, into a sprint. He had a second to see its strange, fabric arms before he sent it blasting back in the air, and hitting one of the walls.

He looked around the room. One girl's dummy was dodging every spell sent at it, getting closer and closer to her. Another was crawling on the ground, inching near one of the tables. Spells were flying through the air, a firework display of bright lights, as the dummies darted out of the way with unnatural speed.

Harry turned back around.

His dummy had lifted a chair and sent it rocketing through the air.

He shielded at the last second. There was a brilliant flash of light as the chair hit against the shield and went flying back. His mind had deserted him. He wasn’t in class anymore, he was in Malfoy Manor. The dummy was a Death-Eater, it was Snape, Bellatrix Lestrange. Voldemort . . .

Harry said the first spell that came to his mind and the dummy exploded, fluff showering the air.

‘You’re very fast,’ a voice remarked.

He jumped. Professor Merrythought had come up beside him. ‘Not

your typical student has those reflexes. They'll come in useful.'

She didn't mention anything about the intensity of which he had destroyed the dummy. Or the fact they were meant to be hexing them, using spells like *The Body-Bind.*

'They have,' Harry agreed. 'I just wish they didn't need to.'

She shook her head. 'You're safe in Britain, you know. I don't know how much help that will do, but it's the truth. No Dark Lord reigns forever. Remember that.'

She moved to other students, leaving Harry in thought. He was so distracted he didn't notice a pair of eyes, dark and curious, watching him the entire time.

Later that day, Harry, Ron and Hermione were sitting around a table in the library. It was quiet. A few younger students were playing chess, but their whispers were only a background noise. The librarian was not the sharp-eyed, strict Madam Pince, but a much more relaxed woman who smiled when they came in.

'I was researching,' Hermione said. 'But there's not much on time-travel. I did the same back in Third Year and the books are no different. What you used isn't a time-turner in the typical sense, Harry. You didn't have to spin it for one thing.'

'I just touched it,' Harry said. 'We all did. It was like I was under a spell. And we ended up here.'

She chewed her lip.

'Do you not think it's weird that an object in Bellatrix's vault brings us back here of all places?' Ron said suddenly. 'To bloody You-Know-Who?'

'Exactly.' Hermione said. 'It's like it was set for this specific time. We didn't make it take us here. That's not a coincidence.'

'Like a portkey,' said Ron. 'That goes into the past.'

Harry thought about it. 'What if it was like a last resort? For You-

Know-Who? If he was about to be killed or something. Or losing. He could take the time-turner, go back and do it all again.'

'And he gave it to Bellatrix to keep safe,' said Ron. 'Same as the Horcrux.'

What if it *was* a Horcrux, Harry thought uneasily. What if Dumbledore was wrong about the amount Voldemort had made?

'If it's a Horcrux we can't destroy it,' he said. 'We'll be stuck here forever.'

He didn't mention the other Horcrux, the diary, he had searched for.

'Professor Dumbledore wants to meet with us and talk on Friday,' Hermione said. 'Maybe he has some theories. Anyway, we know it's not a normal time-turner. And it was in Bellatrix's vault which probably means it's Dark Magic. It brought us *here*.'

'That's what I don't get,' Ron said. 'Riddle's just a seventh year. Do you not think if You-Know-Who wanted a last resort to save himself, we would be sent back to the middle of the first war? When he was at his most powerful? He's still in *school* .'

They thought about that but Harry couldn't think of any answer. Why *were* they here? The more he thought, the stranger the situation seemed.

He was on his way back from the library when he collided with a girl.

Harry hadn't realised he wasn't paying attention; in fact, she seemed to come out of nowhere. One moment he was walking down the corridor, the next smashing headfirst into something small and blonde.

'Shit, sorry,' he said, helping her pick up her fallen books.

When she straightened up, he recognised her immediately. Pale, white hair, a translucent face. Blue eyes stripped of almost all colour; delicate features, like a baby bird or a china doll. She was Belinda Lestrange.

The time-turner was at the very front of his mind and it was the *Lestrange* vault he had found it in.

‘You’re good at getting around the castle but it’s a miracle that’s only happened now.’ She smiled. ‘Walk back with me?’

‘Sure,’ Harry agreed, deciding to ignore the paranoid part of his brain for once.

She was about half the height of him but strangely intimidating.

‘How’re you finding Hogwarts? It must be hard being in a separate house to your two -’

‘Friends.’

‘But we’re still here for you. Slytherin’s a family.’

They reached the dungeons. The temperatures dropped; the lights dimmed. Torchlight was flickering off Belinda’s shiny hair, making it dazzle.

‘I get you, Harry. You think you’re alone but . . . we’re all a bit damaged here. And some of the house may be exactly what you think, but not all of us are. So, if you want to talk, I’d like that.’

She was very close. Her lashes were almost white, like long cobwebs. There was a faint smell of cinnamon and her pale cheeks and lips were pink.

’Of course,’ Harry said. ‘Anytime you want.’

They went through the Portrait Hole and the soft expression on Belinda’s face didn’t change. He couldn’t tell if she had believed him or not but he was saved a moment later by Abraxas.

‘Harry, there you are!’

He frowned when he saw Belinda beside him but it was gone in a second.

‘Alphard and I were talking about the Quidditch Team.’

Harry perked up immediately, making his way over to them.

Alphard Black was almost painful to look at. Harry had been avoiding the boy for the past week, unsure of what he would do if they talked.

He didn't know if he could resist blurting out something stupid, when he looked that much like Sirius.

Dark hair, the same grey eyes. Almost a mirror image of the Sirius Harry had seen from Snape's memory.

Only Sirius' eyes had been alight, bright and wild and a bit cruel. He had held himself in a way that seemed effortless, lounging on the spot.

Alphard's eyes were dim and guarded. He sat with none of Sirius' old ease. 'What position do you play?' he said. 'We're open for Beaters.'

His eyes flickered over Harry. 'Or maybe not.'

'I could be a Beater,' Harry protested.

Abraxas was trying not to smile. 'Of course you could,' he agreed. 'But you should see the Ravenclaw Beaters. They're like mountain-trolls.'

Harry shrugged. 'Yeah, I think I've had enough to do with mountain trolls for the rest of my life.'

He paused.

Could he really do this?

One week and you've already deserted Gryffindor?

'I played Seeker. Before.'

'Let's go back to the mountain-troll bit,' Alphard said, leaning forward in his seat. 'You've seen a real one?'

'It wasn't anything great. It was stupid and very slow.'

'We can do Seeker,' Abraxas said immediately.

Alphard raised his eyebrows. 'We have a seeker.'

'And now we have a *better* one.'

Harry laughed. 'You haven't even seen me fly.'

Abraxas smiled. 'I don't need to. You won't let me down. We already had try-outs but Alphard's captain, so . . .'

'Our seeker's a fourth year,' Alphard said. 'She's good.'

‘I don’t want to take anyone’s place,’ Harry said.

He hesitated, beginning to have second thoughts.

What would Ron think? What was he even doing?

They were meant to be finding a way back. He was going to kill Voldemort.

Not playing Quidditch for Slytherin like some sort of *traitor*.

‘Oh, please, Harry,’ Abraxas said. ‘At least try-out.’

‘Maybe.’

He couldn’t exactly tell them he was planning on getting to the future as soon as possible.

‘Well, your trial’s on Saturday, Potter,’ Alphard said. ‘You have until then.’

When Harry met Ron and Hermione in Defence on Wednesday morning, they were both flushed. Harry’s immediate thought was, *oh great* . He was preparing to suffer through two hours of awkwardness with a foreboding sense of doom.

‘Anything wrong?’ He said casually, and Ron’s face went a deep red. The colour seemed to bloom in his cheeks, and spread outwards.

‘Nothing. Just some bloke in Gryffindor is a bloody *wanker*.’

‘Oh?’

‘Joseph’s perfectly nice,’ Hermione said. ‘Ignore Ron, he doesn’t like people who actually have *manners* .’

‘Joseph?’ Ron’s voice rose. ‘And no, I don’t like bloody Corner. You know, like Michael Corner?’

Harry thought of Ginny and his stomach twisted.

‘He was a prat. Didn’t you say you liked all the Gryffindors, though?’

‘He’s a complete tosser. Always asking Hermione these questions. Where are you from? Whereabouts in Ireland? Did you like it there? Doesn’t the prat realise our *families* are meant to be dead? And then, *you don’t have an Irish accent.* Like he’s trying to catch her out!’

‘It’s not that at all,’ Hermione said heatedly. ‘He was just being polite. Is no-one allowed to have an interest in me? Is that it?’

‘I’m just saying, all those *questions* . . .’

Harry zoned them out. He wished Professor Merrythought would come into the room and force them to be quiet.

He loved those two but why did they have to be so *stupid?* Finally, the fighting died down and when Harry turned back Hermione was as pink as Ron.

‘We saw Moaning Myrtle,’ Ron said, after a beat of silence. He rubbed the back of his neck.

‘And Merlin, it’s *bad*, Harry. She’s worse than Peeves. There’s this fifth-year girl, Olive Hornby, you know, the one who bullied her? And Myrtle just follows her around the castle, all damn day. Crying and shouting and throwing the world's worst tantrum.’

He shuddered. ‘I’m telling you, if that nutter was following me, I’d really be getting home-schooled.’

A horrible thought occurred to Harry. ‘She told me once – she said she haunted Hornby to the day she *died.’*

‘Yeh, the teachers are trying to sort it. I reckon they should get the Ministry involved. Send Myrtle up to ghostly heaven.’

‘Is that possible?’

‘Well, it’s not common. Ghosts are just imprints, they can’t cause any harm. Because ghosts fear death, they don’t move on… They’re just sort of here. But sometimes you can extract them. I don’t know what it involves but mum says - says it’s pretty messed up.’

‘That’s why a lot of the ghosts reside here in the castle,’ Hermione said. ‘Hogwarts is the most haunted place in Europe. They know it’s safe.’

Thought of Moaning Myrtle disappeared when Professor Merrythought

walked in the room. ‘Essays on my desk please. Avery, what in god’s name is that? Some rag you use to blow your nose?’

Harry hid his grin when he saw the dirty roll of parchment Avery was folding. Beside Avery was Alphard, who looked on the verge of rolling his eyes.

Harry turned to Ron. ‘I was thinking of joining the Quidditch Team. I know it’s Slytherin but it’s the game I miss, not the whole competitive part. And Alphard asked me –’

He trailed off.

‘I didn’t know we could play *Quidditch*!’

A few people turned around and Professor Merrythought shushed them.

‘Think I could get my old Keeper spot back? I know you were the captain last time, Harry, so that’s probably why –’

‘Ron, you were not on the team because I was captain. It’s because you’re *good.’*

‘Oh, really, Ron,’ Hermione scoffed. ‘I don’t know much about the sport but even I can see talent.’

He smiled sheepishly.

‘So, you really don’t mind?’ Harry said.

‘No,’ Ron said and grinned. ‘I may have to make a few Malfoy jokes – the green uniform might confuse me a bit and mix you two up. ‘

‘He’s *blond.’*

‘But I suppose, you’re not a Slytherin in our time. And I really missed Quidditch.’

‘Boys,’ Hermione said, but her voice was fond. ‘Does that mean I can ask Dumbledore for extra lessons? Stop laughing, Ron, I find human transfiguration very interesting!’

‘You do that, Hermione,’ Ron said. He touched her hand. ‘And I bet you’re raging they haven’t made you Head Girl.’

‘I am not.’

‘Are too. You’re just *mental,* aren’t you, Hermione?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Nina’s Head Girl.’

She nodded her head towards a small, dark-skinned girl who spotted them and waved. She was wearing a bright pink necklace and bright pink shoes peeked from the bottom of her robes.

‘And she’s very helpful.’

‘You would do just as good,’ Ron said, his humour vanishing. ‘There’s no-one better. Honest.’

‘Maybe,’ Harry said. ‘When we get back. If I kill Voldemort and you two get through everything ok, you could redo seventh year. And you will definitely be Head-Girl.’

Hermione smiled but she looked sad.

‘We’ll be ok, Harry. And not just me and Ron. *You.* We’re going to get back and it’s going to be ok. *You’ll* be ok.’

Unspoken, it hung between them. Settled in the air like thick fog. What exactly would the future be if Voldemort never took over?

Tom was bored.

The thrill from finding out about his parents and discovering he was the heir had died when his father met a sticky death. The Chamber and releasing the Basilisk was now only a wistful memory.

The rush of creating a Horcrux had faded. He remembered getting consumed in it for weeks on end, barely thinking, barely *breathing.*

He had started the Death Eaters, his dream since first year. He had the respect he has always craved. The power. It was wonderful.

But now, Tom had done everything he could do while still at school. He was restless. Every moment that passed felt like a waste of precious time.

He spent the week trying to manipulate the air into becoming a force

that blew trees and sent people crashing backwards. Icy-cold gusts and storms; twisting tornadoes sweeping up everything in sight. It was beyond NEWT level and required more raw power than anything he had attempted before.

But he was Lord Voldemort.

And if he was going to rule the world, he was going to be the *best.*

Days passed wrapped up in Head Boy duties, practicing magic and teaching the Death Eaters.

He smiled that perfect smile, endlessly patient, kind and considerate.

But Tom wanted to tear things down, to release his feelings in an explosion. To curse a mudblood so that they burst apart, organs splattering the walls like sticky red paint.

He wanted to see the shock. The fear. He wanted *something.*

Except no-one suspected Tom of anything except the perfect, talented Head Boy. Even the Death Eaters—his poor little Death Eaters—didn't know what he was truly like. No-one saw anything amiss.

(Professor Dumbledore had disliked Tom from the moment he saw him in Wool's Orphanage at just eleven years old)

No-one saw behind his act.

Except Harry Potter and his two friends.

Harry Potter.

The boy avoided him at every given moment, suspicious, wary, a restless animal ready to bolt. Nothing about him added up. His poor attempts in classes, his sudden skills in Defence. His downright *secrecy*.

Many times, Tom tried to catch him—waited for him to slip up, to blurt something out. He had sent the Death Eaters to be as friendly as possible, but even Belinda had no luck.

'He's so stiff it's like he's under an unbreakable vow,' she said. 'But I think—I don't think there's anything suspicious about him, m'lord.'

His lips curled, pleased, as she said it. As it rolled so effortlessly from her mouth.

My lord, my lord, my lord.

'Don't worry about him,' Tom said. 'Harry Potter is like a sheep in a wolf's clothing. He's not meant to be here. He'll slip up.'

But Tom—Tom couldn't take his own advice.

Was he a spy? For Grindelwald? What did he know?

He was close to Dumbledore, which was unheard of for a Slytherin. And since Harry Potter had come to Hogwarts, Dumbledore had started to watch Tom constantly.

He could feel those blue eyes on his back—constantly shadowing him, following him. It *itched,* like a tracking spell he couldn't break.

That day in potions, while copying down the recipe on the board, Tom was imagining ripping them out.

Not with magic. A part of his mind that he didn't like to acknowledge wanted to do it the muggle way. To dig his fingers into Dumbledore's blue eyes, nails stabbing, *popping*. Bursting through them like jelly, the satisfying *squelch* as he tore them out, blood and grime under his fingers as he twisted and screamed.

How do you like me now, Professor?

Isn't this what you always suspected?

He finished taking down the notes and let his mind wander. Potter's potion had turned out a mess. Runny instead of thick and spilling from the sides of his cauldron. In this class, in particular, he was pitiful.

When the bell rang, Tom packed his bag slowly. Avery was already lingering behind to wait for him, along with Rosier.

'Tom, would you stay behind a minute please? You too, Mr Potter.'

Tom looked up. Harry had gotten halfway to the door and froze. Professor Slughorn was smiling, eyes shining as he looked at Tom; expectant.

Harry's two friends looked anxious.

'Go on,' Harry said. 'I'll be there in a minute.'

They left, along with Rosier and Avery. Tom straightened up, moving towards Slughorn.

‘Mr. Potter,’ Professor Slughorn said. ‘Are you settling into Slytherin alright?’

He watched Harry Potter’s throat bob as he swallowed. ‘Yeah, it’s good, thanks.’

‘Good, good. As Head of Slytherin, it’s my job to look after all my students. I’ve been hearing great things from Professor Dumbledore and Professor Merrythought. They’re very impressed, indeed. However, Harry - ’

Here he frowned, his fat forehead seeming to fold over. ‘You’re lacking a bit in potions. And as one of my Slytherins, it’s my job to get you up to scratch. We’re aiming for O’s. Aren’t we, Tom?’

Tom smiled but didn’t say anything.

‘So I was thinking. Tom here is Head Boy and he’s a dab hand at potions. You could get some tutoring in, he’s very helpful. You wouldn’t mind that, would you, Tom?’

‘Of course not. It would really be my pleasure.’

Harry looked like someone had just killed his pet. ‘It’s ok,’ he said hastily. ‘I’ll just practice. Hermione - or Abraxas - will help out. I don’t mean to bother - ’

‘Nonsense. There’s no-one better than Tom.’

He turned to him. ‘Unless you already have too many Head duties? . . . I suppose I could always free my schedule. ‘

‘Of course not, sir. Harry’s a fellow Slytherin. I always have time.’

Professor Slughorn positively *beamed.*

‘What about this Wednesday at lunch time? This room’s free and my private lab as well, if you prefer. You can go over that potion you - er - attempted. Does that suit you both?’

Tom nodded immediately but Harry was frowning, looking on the verge of refusal.

Professor Slughorn was still smiling but his face brooked no

arguments.

‘Yes, sir,’ Harry said finally.

If Professor Slughorn noticed his lack of enthusiasm, he didn’t say anything. ‘Wonderful.’

Tom hid his smile. Wonderful indeed.

Oh Harry, no more hiding now.

‘You don’t mind do you, Harry?’ Tom said, wide-eyed and earnest.

Harry’s green eyes looked up in shock. But it was enough. The minute those eyes caught his, Tom was in.

His mind was fire. It was brilliant-hot and scorching. Angry flames rising, licking around him, like an inferno. Clouds of smoke, choking out anything else. Red. Everything was red.

There was hatred so overwhelming Tom staggered, retreating immediately.

Harry hadn’t noticed, moving towards the door without sparing Tom another glance.

But he knew what he saw.

Harry Potter did not just dislike him. He hated him.

A grin began to creep onto Tom’s face as he watched him leave the room. How utterly *fascinating*.

Private Lessons

One night the nightmares came back. Gone was the blackness, which he so comfortingly fell into. Peaceful and empty, his mind blissfully blank. What he got instead was ugly.

Harry used to dream of Sirius and his final laugh as he fell. He used to dream of the graveyard – Cedric's body, still, limbs locked in place. Voldemort as he rose from the cauldron, gleaming white like a carved bone. Green light an inch from his face, both searing hot and ice cold, brushing past, never to know what it felt like.

These nightmares were different. They were something conjured from his imagination not experience. Nightmares of dark, shadowy figures that never got too close. They lurked, just in the corner of his eye. They waited. Like Dementors in the distance; shapes that disappeared when you blinked. He imagined being in a small room with nothing but *fear* – fear so overwhelming it woke him up, cold, shaking and covered in gooseflesh.

One of these mornings, Harry woke to brightness. He could still hear odd laughter in his head but the sound was beginning to fade, along with the remnants of the dreams. He rubbed his head, purely out of habit, but there was no headache.

Light was flooding in from a crack in his curtains, so much that he wondered how he had managed to stay asleep at all. He got up, quietly crossing the dorm. Rosier was talking in his sleep, but Harry couldn't make out the words. When he finished in the bathroom, he checked the time. 5:30.

But he couldn't sleep anymore and with one forlorn look at his bed, he left the dorm. Down the steps, to the Common Room . . .

And to Abraxas.

They both blinked, staring at each other.

'What are you doing up so early?' Abraxas said.

'Me?' Harry raised his eyebrows. 'What about you?'

Abraxas hesitated. He couldn't have looked more suspicious if he tried. Hovering on the spot, beginning to fidget, shuffling his feet.

'I was working,' Abraxas finally said.

'Doing what?'

'Well - '

He paused and Harry's eyebrows climbed higher. 'Don't worry about it. I'll leave you anyway.'

'No!'

Harry turned back. Abraxas had one moment where he seemed to struggle with a decision. 'I could explain or I could just show you?'

Harry nodded and they left the Common Room. The dungeons were quiet and Abraxas led him down a corridor he had never been before.

Harry tried to memorize where they were going. Surely this wasn't a trap? All the stone looked the same. All the sharp corners. Like the maze during the Triwizard Tournament.

‘Where are we going?'

Abraxas - as absurd as it seemed - was his friend. He wouldn’t lead him into a trap, would he? Abraxas didn’t answer. His walking came to a halt. 'Here.'

They were at the end of the corridor with doors on both sides. Abraxas pulled open the one on the left and went inside. The room was more brightly lit than any in the dungeons. There was no torchlight but instead the light seemed to come from within. Circular windows lined the room, and out them -

‘Is that merpeople?’ Harry breathed.

There were ghostly shapes in the water, moving around. He made out dark, murky bodies, barely visible. Then the merpeople retreated and Harry tore his eyes away.

‘Yes,’ Abraxas said. ‘We’re right in the middle of the lake.’

Harry didn’t answer. So distracted by the windows, he hadn’t noticed the rest of the room. Or the large canvas taking up half the wall.

On it was what looked like the Forbidden Forest. Dark trees that were swaying. Rustling. Sunlight on the brown earth - golden beams made from tiny brushstrokes. Only half of the painting was moving: the

foreground had the stillness of muggle art.

Harry turned to Abraxas, his eyes wide. ‘Did you *do* that?’

‘Yes.’ He sounded half proud, half sheepish. ’It’s not complete. I have to charm it more and then paint another layer. And getting the grass to move naturally is hard – it keeps repeating a pattern which looks fake.’

‘Fake?’ Harry’s voice rose in wonder. ‘Look at the detail. They don’t even *teach* art at Hogwarts.’

‘I know. But that’s what I want to do. Father wants me to get a job in the Ministry but – ‘

His face contorted. ‘I’d like to make a career from this. Portraits. The moving ones. Merlin - to paint one of *those.’*

Harry knew next to nothing about art but Abraxas’ eyes lit up and his voice hushed, filled with something like yearning.

‘You don’t have to work in the Ministry. No-one can force you.’

‘You would think that, wouldn’t you?’ His lips twisted into a bitter smile. ‘But maybe a part of me does want to. I’m a Malfoy. Do you know what painters get paid? Sickles. Knuts and sickles. Some even go to the *muggle*world for money. Begging around London like *squibs.*’

‘There’s nothing wrong with the muggle world.’

But could he imagine it? Harry didn’t know what he would do if he was suddenly sent to London, wand taken from him, told to be normal .

‘I’d rather guard Azkaban than leave the Wizarding World, Harry. I’m a Malfoy. I *have* to do something.’

Harry saw Draco then, in the upwards tilt of his nose. The voice — pompous, self-assured . . . Desperate?

‘I knew a boy once,’ Harry said. ‘Who always did what his father wanted. He thought it was his duty. His role.’

Sectumsempra. A bathroom. Blood everywhere. White face, white hair. Hands trembling, blood pouring.

‘He’s like a shell of a person now. Weak and scared and *miserable.* And

he's so far caught up that he can't leave.'

Abraxas was frowning.

'Did he please his father then?'

'No. It was never enough. He couldn't be pleased. He just ended up ruining himself.'

Abraxas' sneer when he spoke of muggles, his loyalty to Riddle. It was the future, the Ministry, but Harry would do anything to prevent it.

Voldemort . . . Death Eater . . . Lucius . . . Draco . . .

He stopped himself.

'I don't think a Ministry job would ruin me,' Abraxas said. He sounded thoughtful. 'But there really isn't a reason to get one immediately after Hogwarts. It could wait.'

'You could try painting. In the Wizarding World not the muggle. And then have the Ministry to fall back on.'

'I suppose,' Abraxas said. 'But it's a big risk. What if they were ashamed of me?'

'Then they're not worth it. At least – at least think about.'

They went up to breakfast. The only person awake was Rosier and he raised his eyebrows when he saw Abraxas as if to say - really? You're still hanging around with him?

'Don't worry about it,' Abraxas said. 'You have Quidditch later. Don't want to be distracted.'

Harry had a piece of bacon halfway to his mouth. 'I have what now?'

'Your Quidditch try-out. Don't tell me you've forgotten.'

'Of course not.'

Was it Saturday already?

'Alright, maybe. And I don't have any gear. Or even a broom.'

'You can use mine. Just don't break it.'

Harry couldn't imagine Draco Malfoy ever offering to let him borrow his broomstick. Maybe it was time to stop comparing the two.

'I would never,' Harry said. 'What do you take me for? A first year?'

'Well, you have only joined the school.' He grinned.

They were finishing up as Belinda and Lucretia entered the hall. Belinda's blonde hair was tied back in its plait, but Lucretia had hers rolled up in a bun, half-falling in her face.

'Great,' she said, stifling a yawn. 'Pass the coffee would you, Harry?'

Harry shoved it up the table.

'My father heard Grindelwald's been spotted in France,' she continued. 'Nowhere near Beauxbatons but still near enough to be worrying.'

Belinda rolled her eyes. 'What do you have to be worried about? You're a pureblood. *You're* not fighting him.'

'True,' Lucretia said. She glanced at Harry. 'But it's still worrying.'

Harry tried to look sad, or scared, or something. It seemed to work because when Abraxas opened his mouth, Belinda shushed him and her expression was kinder than it had been before.

'This isn't the sort of thing to discuss at breakfast,' she said. 'I heard you're trying out for the Quidditch team.'

'Yeah,' Harry agreed, only half-surprised. Because of *course* half the house knew. 'Trying out being the key words.'

Abraxas laughed.

'You're so negative,' Lucretia said, her lips pursed. She looked a bit like Mrs. Weasley, or even Ginny, when she was annoyed.

Harry's insides lurched at the thought of Ginny. The scrambled eggs and bacon in his stomach were sloshing around. For a second, he had almost forgotten how wrong this whole situation was.

'I'm afraid it comes with the name,' Harry said. 'Harry Potter, the poor negative orphan.'

The Boy Who Lived.

Belinda raised her eyebrows. 'Interesting. And not to join in on this negativity but you know it's raining, don't you?'

Harry tilted his head and looked out one of the windows.

'It'll be fine,' Abraxas said firmly. 'Won't it, Harry?'

Harry finished chewing. ‘I've seen worse,' he agreed.

By the time Alphard Black came down to breakfast, Lucretia was making fun of how much Harry ate.

'You should see my friend, Ron,' he protested, unable to hide his grin. 'And then you wouldn't talk.'

Belinda smiled, looking towards Lucretia with a sly expression. 'You should introduce her. Lucretia might like him.'

Lucretia glared so fiercely that anyone would have shrank back.

But Belinda didn’t.

A look passed between them, a strained moment of communication with no words.

‘I’m only teasing. You’re so - *defensive*.’

Harry didn’t have any time to wonder what was going on. Alphard Black sat down. He was dressed in full Quidditch gear, forest-green with a captain’s badge pinned to his chest.

'You ready?’ He reached for the toast in the centre of the table.

'Yeah,' Harry said. 'But I don't have any gear.'

'There's spare. In need of a good Scourgify though.'

Harry winced at the thought of the smelly spare Quidditch uniforms. 'Great. I could always fly in my robes?'

'Funny.'

They finished eating and went outside.

Belinda was wrong about the weather. The rain had stopped and the sky was the grey of early morning, pale light just behind the clouds. They crossed the Quidditch pitch, the grass wet and glimmering with dew.

Harry had never been in the Slytherin changing rooms before and was disappointed. It looked identical to the Gryffindor ones apart from the towels, which were green.

'Don't break my broom,' Abraxas said, handing it over.

It wasn't a Firebolt. In fact, it was about the same as the brooms they had used in first year, minus the bent bristles.

'I won't,' Harry said. 'Promise.'

The try-out was rather like first year with Oliver Wood. Only Harry didn't need the rules of Quidditch explained and Abraxas and Alphard didn't go easy on him.

They were both riding brooms, carrying Beater's bats and hurling Bludgers from every direction. Harry had never had to swerve so much in his life. The broom was slow and it took a lot more force than the firebolt, which he could manoeuvre with just a finger.

It started to rain. Harry caught all the transfigured snitches that darted around the pitch and eventually spotted the real one near one of the goalposts. When they finished, he was flushed, skin wet with both rain and sweat, and feeling more alive than he had in weeks.

‘You have the position,’ was all Alphard Black said.

Abraxas was beaming and when Harry gave him back his broom, he pretended to inspect it, checking for damage.

They showered under tepid water. Harry was aware more than ever of the scars he had gathered. The one from the Basilisk fang on his arm and the other, like a puncture-hole from Nagini.

The faded mark on his hand – *I must not tell lies* – and the white, oval-shaped one from the locket.

That would be hard to explain.

But Alphard and Abraxas didn’t say anything and they headed up the paths to Hogwarts once again. Ron and Hermione were coming out of

the Hall.

‘Harry,’ Hermione said, her eyes lighting up. ‘What time did you get up?’

‘Two in the morning?’ Ron suggested.

‘About six,’ Harry said. ‘I couldn’t sleep. Dreams.’

They stopped abruptly.

‘Dreams?’ Ron repeated. ‘ *Those* sorts of dreams?’

‘That’s not possible,’ Hermione said. ‘Voldemort hasn’t tried to kill you here. He doesn’t even exist.’

‘Not those sorts of dreams,’ Harry said quickly. ‘I don’t think so. My scar doesn’t hurt. But – ‘

He absently-mindedly rubbed his head.

‘Nightmares.’

‘I get them too,’ Hermione said, her voice small. ‘About Malfoy Manor.’

Ron grabbed her hand, squeezing it like he was afraid it would disappear. ‘Same. Those brain things in the ministry.’ He shuddered. ‘Malfoy Manor too. The Snatchers. Bloody all this Horcrux hunting.’

‘When we get back,’ Harry said, ignoring the grim look on Hermione’s face. ‘We have to get into Gringotts again. For the cup.’

‘If we go back to that exact moment in time,’ she said, ‘we’ll be already there. And I have the sword.’

‘Griphook - ‘Harry started.

‘We’ll deal with it when it comes. And didn’t you say he can have the sword when all the Horcruxes are destroyed?’

It seemed like years ago, centuries.

‘Yeah. I did say that.’

Harry didn’t like the look on her face: the resigned look. She was trying to hold her tongue for his benefit. What were they both

thinking? They might end up stuck here?

They had met Dumbledore yesterday but he had found nothing that could help them.

‘I want to see my family again,’ Ron said, as though he read Harry’s mind. ‘We’re getting back.’

‘Dumbledore will do something.’ Harry felt uncertain. ‘Or we’ll - we’ll bloody break into the Lestrange vault and find the same pocket-watch. Maybe that’ll take us back.’

‘Or kill us,’ Ron said.

‘You don’t even know it’s there,’ Hermione said. ‘I think we need to repair it. I’m still reading and it’s unusual. But - it took us to this exact spot. It was meant to come here. And if we get it fixed - ‘

‘We’ll be back in the vault,’ Ron said.

‘Exactly.’

Harry was thinking, his mind going to Riddle who seemed to watch him. With his trunk that Harry couldn’t get into. ‘You need to take the fake-locket.'

Ron and Hermione stopped talking.

‘In fact, my mokeskin pouch. Only I can open it but Riddle could *destroy* it. If he finds the wand pieces, the snitch, the locket or the map . . .’

Riddle with a map of everyone in Hogwarts.

‘ It’s too risky in the dorm. If something happens . . .’

He won’t find out. He won’t. He can’t.

‘I’ll take it,’ Ron said. ‘Hermione already has everything in her bag. We’ll put it there.’

Harry breathed out. ‘Ok. It’s safer in the Gryffindor dorm. Maybe I’m being paranoid but keeping it near Riddle -’

Ron shuddered.

‘I wouldn’t be able to sleep,’ he agreed.

The only possession Harry kept was the Invisibility Cloak. He wanted to give his friends that too but Hermione refused.

'You're at the most risk out of all of us,' Ron said. 'You'll *need* it.'

He still didn't like it but giving Ron the fake locket took a weight from his chest he didn't know he had.

It was only later Hermione asked about the time-turner.

'It's in my pocket.' He took it out and showed her. 'Just in case it does something.'

'That's risky,' she said. 'What if it explodes? Or kills you?'

They were both thinking of the locket, poisoned with dark magic. But the time-turner wasn't like that.

'I'll hide it in my trunk then,' he said, not sure if it was the truth or not. Because despite everything she said, he didn't *want* to. Harry didn't know why, but the thought of parting with the time-turner couldn't feel more wrong.

Like all things dreaded, Wednesday crept up on him far too soon. Hours passed in minutes, many of them in trepidation. Seemingly overnight, the week was gone. On Wednesday, there would be no more avoiding Riddle. Harry would be stuck with him for one entire lunchtime. Alone.

'Pretend you don't have a problem with him,' was Hermione's advice.

Harry snorted. Riddle was suspicious as it was, a random mood-swing would only make it worse.

'No, listen to me, Harry, do not annoy him. Stop acting like he's your worst enemy. You're meant to be a Slytherin now, aren't you?'

Harry and Ron both turned to stare at her.

'Then *be* a Slytherin. Pretend it's Slughorn tutoring you. Or just the Head Boy who you think is completely harmless.'

‘Who didn’t kill his whole family, or Myrtle, and doesn’t call himself *The Dark Lord*,’ Ron said. ‘Should be easy, right?’

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. ‘Do you realise what will happen when Harry starts treating him like a killer? Or firing off spells when he comes near him?’

‘I’m not that stupid,’ Harry said.

They both ignored him.

‘It’s going to be for about an hour,’ Hermione continued. ‘Try and act innocent, *please.* You already think he’s suspicious of you. Now you have a chance to get rid of that.’

‘Just act like an idiot,’ Ron said. ‘And burn yourself trying to light the cauldron. Then you can run away.’

Harry laughed despite himself. ‘I don’t have a problem with Tom Riddle,’ he said, trying out the words.

They sounded *wrong.*

‘And he has no reason to suspect anything. I’m a transfer student failing potions who knows nothing about what’s happening in Slytherin.’

‘You haven’t even heard the word Death Eater before,’ Hermione said.

Harry feigned a look of bafflement. ‘Death Eater? What’s that?’

The bell began to ring.

‘Good luck,’ Ron said, clapping him on the back.

‘You’ll be fine,’ said Hermione. ‘Pretend he’s just a student.’

‘You sure I can’t skip?’ Harry’s voice was becoming a bit desperate. ‘Say I got the days wrong?’

She hesitated but luck was not on their side.

‘Harry,’ a voice said.

They turned around. Slughorn was coming down the corridor and straight towards them. ‘Excellent timing, my boy. Now follow me.’

They went down to the dungeons, Professor Slughorn babbling the whole way. Harry only half-listened. Dread had settled in his stomach and he was too busy trying to keep his breathing steady. He made a few noises of agreement that Professor Slughorn seemed happy with.

They reached the potions classroom, turned and went into an empty identical room.

‘There used to be two potion teachers,’ Professor Slughorn said. ‘But now there’s just me so the spare classroom isn’t needed. Only for NEWT students and supervised study.’

‘Are you staying to supervise, professor?’

Slughorn chortled. 'I don't think that's necessary. You aren't brewing the Draught of Living Death, are you? And Tom is capable.' He nodded to himself. 'More than capable.'

The door opened and there Riddle was, his smile as shiny as his shoes. His hair fell neatly over his head and his eyes were bright and shiny.

'Perfect timing. Do come in.'

Slughorn launched into an explanation about preparing what they did the other day in class. Harry remembered his strange, runny orange concoction with a half-smile.

'Ingredients are in there.’ He waved his hand towards a room out the back.

'And if you do need assistance, remember to leave the room before anything explodes.'

He laughed nervously. 'You got everything, boys?'

They both nodded.

'Great, great.'

And then he was gone, leaving Harry and Riddle in silence. Harry could feel Riddle watching. His eyes seemed to sear right through him. He knew without turning around that he was smirking.

‘I'll get the ingredients,' Harry said, setting off as fast as he could.

He tried to remember Ron and Hermione’s words.

Act natural. He's just a student.

Just a student. Just a student.

'Need any help?'

Riddle's face appeared around the door of the room and Harry nearly dropped the fairywings on the floor.

'Yeah,' he said, taking a deep breath. 'Grab the cauldron.'

Riddle didn't and instead levitated it in the air so it floated alongside him. Prat.

'I heard you joined the Quidditch Team. Pursuing your ambitions early?'

What ambitions?

'Oh, yeah. You know, better to be prepared.'

Riddle looked amused, a cat-like smirk crossing his face.

'Of course,' he agreed.

They started chopping the ingredients. Riddle told Harry things, his voice taking on a profession quality.

'And then you stir it three times to bind the slug venom,' or '*Knotweed has neutralising properties to counteract the nightshade.'*

Harry would have rather thrown everything in the cauldron and called it a day. He would even drink the potion if it meant leaving.

‘You're close to Dumbledore,' Riddle said.

Harry, who was stirring the potion, almost dropped his wand into it. 'He's nice. Helped us to get settled in.'

'In Slytherin?'

'In *Hogwarts.*'

Riddles hummed. ‘Dumbledore doesn’t show much help to Slytherins,

I'm afraid. He's under an impression we're evil.'

His smile was odd, bitter and amused and sinister all at once. 'Unless you're the exception.'

'He took me to Diagon Alley,' Harry said. 'That's nice of him. Who do you think I should go to then? *Slughorn?'*

Riddle was close, so close his voice seemed to go right through Harry, rattle into his very bones.

'Slughorn won't tell you one end of your wand from the other. But if you want help in *other* ways, perhaps meet Quidditch players or captains, then he has exactly what you need. Never underestimate someone with that much influence.'

'I don't want to cheat and meet some captain. I want to prove I'm good enough myself.'

'How noble of you. Is that why you're here then? To prove yourself?'

'I'm here,' Harry said irritably. 'Because my family were killed by Grindelwald and this is the safest place in Europe. It doesn't take a genius to put two and two together.'

There was a beat of silence.

And then Riddle *laughed.*

It wasn't the high, cold laugh of Voldemort, or even the charming one he did around their classmates. It was still cold, cutting even, but very much *real* - alive and amused. A human's laugh instead of a monster's.

'Of course not. You're very distant, Harry. All those emotional scars?'

'Something like that.'

'We could keep you safe, you know.' His voice was soft, low, far too close.

Harry took an immediate step back and Riddle's eyes narrowed ever so slightly.

'You would never have to fear Grindelwald again.'

'I heard about your *little club,* ' Harry said. 'But I've had enough of the Dark Arts. I just want to finish school.'

’I wouldn’t call it a club. More a . . . Revolution.’

Harry snorted. ‘Lovely. I’m not interested.’

He went back to stirring the potion when Riddle grabbed his wrist. Harry leapt back, almost toppling the cauldron. Riddle smiled at his reaction, watching him with those unnerving eyes.

‘You’re not paying attention. This is magic you’re creating - *art* - not a muggle stew. You have no precision.’

Harry tried to wrench his arm away but Riddle’s grip was solid. In fact, the more Harry squirmed the more pleased he looked. Finally, he stopped and let Riddle stir the stupid potion.

I hope he dies.

Riddle let go. Tingles went up Harry’s arm, making him shiver. He wanted to claw at it; maybe scrub it under scalding water for an hour or a month. But he couldn’t let it show.

‘Just - er - monkshood now.’

He went to throw it all in but Riddle snatched it up.

Harry frowned.

‘A bit at a time. *Patience.*’

‘Well, hurry up. I’m hungry.’

‘That desperate to leave?’ He teased.

Harry kept his voice light, despite this being the oddest situation he had ever been in. ‘No-one wants to make potions during lunch. So excuse me if I’m not ecstatic at the thought.’

Riddle began putting the monkshood in, ever so slowly.

'What about Defence? Are you interested in that?'

'I suppose. More than this anyway.'

This was the last step. Thank God.

'You must have had lots of practice.'

'Yeah - I mean - wait, what? Not any more than anyone else.'

'Didn't Professor Merrythought say you had remarkably fast reflexes?'

Harry smiled. ‘You know me. Quidditch.' He dumped the rest of the monkshood in and a muscle clenched in Riddle's jaw, like it annoyed him, the deliberate disobedience of the recipe.

How did Riddle even know what Professor Merrythought said?

Harry frowned. 'What do you want? Are you just going to annoy me and make cryptic remarks from time to time? Because frankly, I don't care.'

‘I want to know why you avoid me.'

Harry's eyebrows raised and his heart skyrocketed. 'Avoid you? That's a bit arrogant, isn't it?'

'We all have our suspicions,' he said easily. 'But I know you don't like me, Harry. Look at you, itching to get away. I want to know the truth.'

There was silence.

'You're mental,' Harry said. 'I don't know if you’re just used to everyone fawning over *great Tom Riddle* but I don't have a problem with you. Is that so hard to believe?'

'You're lying,' Riddle said. His eyes were shining, glinting. He *enjoyed* this. 'What exactly have I done to you?'

'Be annoying?'

'I will find out, you know.’ He laughed. ‘We have many more Wednesdays.'

‘You’re insane,’ Harry muttered.

When he left the room, he was shaking. From anger, from worry, from the urge to *scream.* Riddle was goading him, teasing him, like a cat with a mouse. Just waiting for him to slip up.

The thought that he would slip up - slip up not just for himself but for Ron and Hermione - was terrifying. Worse than anything else.

Riddle’s laughter still rang in his ears the whole way back from the dungeons. He wouldn’t prove it. He wouldn’t find out.

Certainty overtook Harry; determination. He wouldn't find out because Harry wouldn't let him.

He was going to get Dumbledore. And he was going to try Occlumency again.

Dream Catchers

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Harry told Ron and Hermione about the tutoring with Riddle, they were both worried. Hermione, unusually pale, told Harry to try and not annoy him anymore. Harry stifled a snort. She didn't think Occlumency was wise - what if Dumbledore saw his own death while going through Harry's mind? - and believed that seeing that much of the future would change something.

But things had *already* changed and Ron agreed. 'You can't avoid his eyes forever, hoping he isn't reading your mind.'

We have many more Wednesdays.

It echoed in his head, as clear as it had been in the moment. Riddle wouldn't let him rest – Harry was his new, shiny puzzle. Eventually, Hermione had agreed.

Things went from nice to prickly in Slytherin House. Harry didn't know when it changed, but seemingly overnight, the atmosphere was frosty. The welcome he had gotten before had vanished. Lucretia no longer smiled and waved at him, Belinda no longer offered her friendship. Avery and Rosier, who disliked him but kept it to themselves, now provoked him.

And when Harry saw Riddle seated on one of the chairs in front of the fire, the green flames flickering against his face, he knew. *He* had done this.

What was it? A threat? A way to show the power he had?

Harry stared at that enigmatic smile and couldn't find the answer.

Abraxas looked like he was being torn in two at every passing moment.

'I can't - 'he began. 'Harry, if you don't want to be part of anything in the house, I don't know what's going to happen.'

'We can't be friends, you mean?' Harry said.

He glanced over at Alphard Black, who was hunched over a Quidditch magazine. *Sirius' favourite uncle, blasted from the tree for leaving him gold.*

'What about Alphard? He doesn't look too involved.'

'That's different. Alphard's a pur - 'he stopped.

'A pureblood?'

'A *Black*. I don't think you have any idea of what that name means. As long as he isn't out killing Slytherins, he can do what he wants. And Tom has Alphard's approval. They get along.'

Approval.

Not friendship, or whatever other relationships the Slytherins thought they had with Riddle.

'Then he has my approval too,' Harry lied. 'I've said a million times, I don't have a problem with him.'

Abraxas didn't answer. He saw staring at something behind Harry and his white face went almost translucent.

'Let's walk to Herbology then, Harry,' a voice said. 'I'm very glad to have your approval.'

Harry spun around. 'Alright,' he agreed.

He was annoyed at Abraxas, so much that he would rather suffer Riddle alone than have the other boy there. They walked out of the Common Room and up the stone steps.

'You'll have to excuse their behaviour,' Riddle said, when he saw Harry wasn't going to speak. 'They get a little protective.'

'I didn't do anything to you. So why do you need a bunch of guard-dogs?'

'*Guard-dogs,'* he repeated. 'It is a bit like that, isn't it?'

He shrugged. 'They can't be helped, I'm afraid.'

Yes, they can.

'I don't care if you make the whole house hate me. I'm not playing

your stupid games.'

'I wouldn't call it a *game.'*

Harry's head leapt to his scar as tingles shot through it. It wasn't the pain of when Voldemort was extremely angry but a curious, throbbing that prickled. He put his hand down. How could the scar hurt him *here?*

He looked at Riddle, feeling more uneasy by the minute.

'Headache,' he said.

'That's a curious scar.' Riddle slowed his walk and Harry had no choice but to do the same. 'How did you get it?'

'Dark magic. Some wizard tried to murder me.'

'Yet you survived.'

He reached his hand up as though he was going to touch it. Harry jerked back. The scar was already prickling, he didn't want Riddle's hands all over it.

'Don't touch it!'

He stopped, his eyes widening. That hand that had reached for Harry's head had slowly retreated back. But not before he saw it. The ring - black and bulky, entirely out of place - on one of Riddle's slim fingers.

'Maybe that isn't wise. Dark magic and all.'

Harry wrenched his eyes away from the ring.

Horcrux. Another horcrux.

'Maybe,' he said. 'Let's get to class.'

Harry set off down the hall. Riddle had killed the last of his family. And he wore that Gaunt ring - that piece of his *soul* - like a badge of honour. There was no way Harry could take it without Riddle finding out.

He contained his breathing and at last, got his head cleared.

'Great, we're on time,' Harry said, when they reached the greenhouse. 'No need to wait around.'

Riddle's brows furrowed and Harry smiled innocently.

He forced himself not to look at the ring, to hide his revulsion. He pushed open the door.

Harry's scar didn't disturb him for the rest of the day but he couldn't get rid of the uneasy feeling it had brought. How on earth was it bothering him here?

Because as much as he hated Tom Riddle, he wasn't Voldemort who had tried to kill Harry as a baby. They didn't have a connection.

He thought of Riddle's sly smile and that mocking laughter. It just wasn't possible.

He didn't mention it to Ron and Hermione who had enough to deal. It must have just been a freak reaction. A simple headache. Nothing else. He tried to push it from his mind as the rest of the day passed.

After lessons, he had Quidditch practice. Abraxas was by his side, looking regretful. But it still stung.

There was a tension between the team, and maybe it was because he was a new player, but the Beaters seemed to aim solely at him. And there were no girls.

Harry wondered what Ginny would think of that and got that horrible ache in his stomach that happened when he thought of her. Ginny - brilliant, bold Ginny - was at Hogwarts right now. A different Hogwarts, controlled by Snape.

Or was she?

His head hurt too much when he thought of the time-travel and all the possibilities it arose.

Ginny, he told himself, right now wasn't even *born.* But he would get back. *They* would get back.

The team showered and trudged back up to the castle in the drizzle without a word. In times like this, Harry wondered why he had even wanted to play Quidditch again in the first place.

He finished the rest of his homework (the workload was so intense it took several hours), spent the evening with Ron and Hermione, and when curfew was called, went to bed. He had forgotten about his scar at that point and the event from earlier. All he was thinking about was Ginny, the Weasleys . . . home . . .

Before he drifted off an image of Voldemort - no longer dark and handsome but chalk-faced and grotesque - flashed in his mind.

The room was large but there were no windows. Beds formed a line against one of the walls. Identical, small beds, their once white-sheets now a moth-eaten grey. The children greatly outnumbered the bedding. About twenty boys and girls were sitting in the room, cramped and squashed, some on the floor.

He was one of them.

Dozens of children, some crying and wailing but most just staring, blank-eyed. Dozens of children and none of them pleasant.

Bitterness consumed him, washed out every other thought. How long he had been here . . . how much he hated it . . .

The cries were becoming overwhelming, like the sound of a record scratching or someone grinding their teeth. Over and over . . .

He stared at the wall for there was no window. How much he hated these bratty, stupid children. How he was stuck here. Sleeping on the cold, hard floor, with its damp spots and mould. Eating tinned *slop*.

A door creaked and they all turned around. The cries quietened, ever so slightly. The door was opening slowly, making a long, groaning sound with every inch.

A silhouette filled the doorway, dark in the dim-light. They were coming into the room, seeming to fill it up . . . Like a great, black, shadow; a ghostly being. Something horrible and incomprehensible. He felt it right down to his bones.

Closer, getting bigger . . .

Harry jerked awake.

His heart was beating so hard it would surely jump from his chest. The dream was clearer than any he had experienced here. All the vague impressions, faces and feelings that ruined his sleep had merged into one picture.

It seemed real . . .

Harry didn't spring from the bed as much as he wanted to. His scar was not hurting, but there was no mistaking whose dreams they were.

Sleeping just in the bed beside him. Metres away.

Riddle.

He didn't manage to sleep after that and when the first hints of light began to peak through the curtains, Harry was up, wide-awake, not at all tired, and full of an odd clarity that came with many hours lying in the dark.

The first thing he did was tell Ron and Hermione.

They couldn't go to Dumbledore until classes were over, and Harry was so distracted he barely noticed Riddle's eyes on him or even Abraxas' chatter.

When lessons ended, they were up the marble stairs - there was a moment when Harry almost went to the Headmaster's office, forgetting Dippet was in charge - and Hermione had to remind him that wasn't the way.

Dumbledore looked up from a book when they burst into the room. He pushed his half-moon glasses up his nose.

'What can I do for you? There's not much progress with your time-turner, I'm afraid. It would be more help if I could have it and examine it thoroughly.'

Hermione's eyes were on him.

Harry took it out of his pocket and reluctantly gave it over. 'That's not what we're here for,' he said. 'I was wondering if you would teach me Occlumency. Riddle knows Legilimency and if he finds anything out

from reading my mind, we're all in trouble.'

'Do you think Occlumency would be necessary?'

'Yes.'

Dumbledore didn't know Voldemort - couldn't grasp the sheer horror he brought. Even his very name made hearts stop.

'You told me you had these lessons before,' Dumbledore said. 'With another Professor, and that they weren't a success.'

'That's Snape,' Harry said. 'He's a lying, backstabbing bast - '

Hermione coughed loudly.

'Also - '

He hesitated. The link between him and Voldemort had never been fully explained. He wasn't even sure Dumbledore – his Dumbledore - understood it. If he had, he would never find out.

'When Voldemort tried to kill me, the curse rebounded. I got this scar and I've been able to feel his emotions, even have visions and speak Parseltongue. It linked us.'

Dumbledore was frowning but didn't interrupt. Harry went on. 'I've always had it. My scar hurts when Voldemort's angry or happy or feeling any strong emotion. He used it once to trick me into getting to the Ministry and get a prophecy. Planted a false memory . . . '

Harry broke off. He couldn't talk about Sirius.

'But my scar hurt yesterday, just for a second, while talking to Riddle. And I've been having these dreams.'

He went on to explain them.

'I don't see how it's possible,' said Hermione. 'Harry has the connection to Voldemort through almost being killed as a baby. Not Riddle.'

'The You-Know-Who that we know doesn't even exist,' Ron agreed.

Dumbledore was silent in thought. 'It has to be something deeper. Something inside you - both of you - joining you together. Unless perhaps, it's because you see Mr. Riddle as the Dark Lord, Harry, and

that you believe it so much your subconscious has been tricked.'

'Definitely not,' said Harry. 'Maybe before, when we first got here. But now - I know they're different.'

'I'll have to look into this. You share wand cores, correct?'

'Brother wands,' Harry agreed. 'But that's because of the Killing Curse rebounding too.'

Or was it? He suddenly felt lost.

'I just don't understand -'

'Nor do I,' Dumbledore agreed. 'And I think it would be best if Mr. Riddle didn't become knowledgeable with this either. I agree to your Occlumency lessons.'

'Great,' Harry said, sagging in relief. 'When will we start?'

'How about now?' Dumbledore closed the book on his desk. 'There is no time like the present.'

Harry glanced at Ron and Hermione.

'We'll just catch you later,' Ron said, edging out of the office. He gave him the thumbs up. 'Good luck.'

Dumbledore stood up when they were gone, clearing objects from his desk.

'Wait!' Harry said. 'There's some things you shouldn't see. Even knowing the future . . . '

No-one should see their own death, Hermione had said.

'I could put it in the Pensieve. If you have a Pensieve, that is. I just . . . Don't think -'

Dumbledore's face softened. 'Perhaps that would be for the best, Harry. Any thought of myself - or even perhaps Grindelwald - you may want to get rid of.'

'How do I do it?' Harry said.

Dumbledore went to one of his cupboards and retrieved the Pensieve.

Unlike all the other times he has seen it, there was no misty white light. It looked like a bowl full of a dark, shining liquid that seemed to go on forever, never reaching a bottom.

Harry imagined if he put his hand through, there would be nothing there at all.

'Think of a memory you want to extract. As vividly as you can. Or alternatively, gather all the information you want gone. Line it up. Make sure it's clear.'

Everything to do with the Deathly Hallows and Grindelwald. The night Dumbledore fell from the Astronomy Tower. Snape's face as he shouted the Killing Curse. The charred, blackened hand.

Harry briefly thought of Sirius, but something possessive burned inside him. The memories - no matter how dreadful - were *his* and he couldn't bear to part with them.

'Excellent. Bring your wand to your head and feel yourself pull the memory out. Close your eyes.'

Harry did, taking a deep breath. 'You'll feel the memory trying to pull away - don't resist - let it.'

It was an unnatural sensation, like fingers probing in his brain. He *felt* the memory slipping away . . . Dumbledore's glazed eyes were becoming fainter . . . Snape was a dark, black shadow on the Tower that he could no longer see clearly. . .

He opened his eyes. From his wand was a long trail of silvery-light. He was staring at it one moment and the next it was breaking and falling into the Pensieve in a swirl.

'Again, Harry.'

Another strand, dropping into the basin, which was now glowing, pearly, and resembling clouds. Harry stared down at it and saw a flash of the Dark Mark in the mist.

He quickly looked up.

'How do you feel?' Dumbledore said.

'My mind feels clear.'

Was this what Snape meant when he said clear your mind?

‘My thoughts - I’m not focusing on them. Or my emotions.’

‘What about the memories?’

Harry thought of that night on the Astronomy Tower.

‘I still know what happened. Faintly. I know they’re in the Pensieve. But if I think really hard, I can’t remember. I can’t reach them.’

It was frustrating. Harry knew what happened that night, but when he tried to remember the details he couldn’t. There was a block in his mind, they were just out of reach. Shapes and impressions.

‘Good. You will, of course, be taking them back when this lesson is over.’

He must have noticed the look on Harry’s face.

‘Memories are both a blessing and a curse. For when we think on them, they let us feel. Sometimes that is pain and it’s the hardest of all. But memories without any feelings is the real curse, even if it doesn’t seem so now.’

‘Like Riddle.’

‘Perhaps. Mr. Riddle has gone to despicable means to shut himself off from humanity. Means he may never be able to come back from. Could spiral into.’

Harry frowned. Riddle *would* spiral into it, already had.

It almost sounded like . . .

‘You think he can *change*?’

Dumbledore smiled, but it couldn’t have looked sadder. ‘Maybe. Maybe not. Some things, like horcruxes, you don’t come back from.’

Harry was silent.

‘Very well.’ Dumbledore cleared his throat. ‘Shall we begin? Relax your mind. I find it best to think of a nice place. Somewhere comforting. Peaceful. I like to think I’m in a meadow. In the springtime. Surrounded by unicorns.’

Harry smiled.

He closed his eyes and imagined the Burrow. The table was bustling, Ron and Hermione were on either side of him, pink-cheeked from the warmth. Across the table was Ginny and when she caught his eye she winked, her smile slow and sly. Beside her was Fred and George, their heads together as they planned something. Mr and Mrs Weasley were both smiling.

And at the very end of the table were Sirius and Remus, looking younger than ever in that moment, years stripped from old faces as they laughed.

A fire was crackling in the corner, Crookshanks was rubbing against Harry's leg.

'I'm going to invade your mind. Try and be aware of my presence, Harry, and not only hear the spell. Keep your mind clear.'

He heard it softly, and out of habit, braced himself.

'Legilimens.'

It was not Snape's brutal invasion. It felt almost like nothing, except the Burrow was becoming distorted . . . Ginny across from him was fading away . . .

'Your mind's very calm. Good. Be aware of something different. Feel it. I'm going to try and find your memories. Repel me in a way that seems natural to you.'

And then he felt fingers – delicate fingers - picking in his head. He saw Ron and Hermione from earlier that day – tried to push it away but it had already disappeared, turning into Abraxas, staring at him from beside Rosier. Morphing into Riddle, the Gaunt ring bold and ugly on his finger.

Push him out. Push him out.

They were in Bellatrix's vault, and it was so dark he could barely see. The pocket-watch was shining, beckoning . . . The image lurched.

Now, Harry saw the dark dungeon of Malfoy Manor, Pettigrew's face as his hand turned on him, wrapping around his own neck.

Screaming from just above their heads, loud and high and painful.

Hermione.

The image disappeared along with everything else. He was slumped over, catching his breath. It was like he had been punched over and over again by Dudley and his gang.

‘I can’t do it,’ he said, finally straightening up. ‘I just can’t stop getting affected.’

Dumbledore was watching him carefully.

‘I think that went satisfactory for a first lesson. Not everyone can do Occlumency, it’s a very rare skill. You wear your emotions on your sleeve. You feel strongly, more so than others. That is not a bad thing.’

Snape didn’t agree.

'Your memories. They are more intense than other peoples. Horrors, things that leave lasting impressions. Those memories are easy to get tied up in and let your emotions take control.’

‘You treasure your best memories. They’re sacred. That’s why you find Occlumency hard, Harry. You *feel.’*

‘Dementors like me anyway,’ Harry muttered. ‘You know, I’m a magnet for misery. Maybe it's like that.’

Dumbledore’s face was younger, less lined. But it was the same voice - the same man. And it brought waves of longing to Harry, along with a bittersweet sadness.

‘That last memory, in the dungeon, was recent.’

‘Yeah.’ Harry swallowed. ’ Just before we got here.’

‘And forgive me for prying, but you have a lot of guilt associated with it. Sometimes for Occlumency, you need to address your thoughts before you can conceal them.’

‘I got us captured. By saying Voldemort's name. There was a taboo on it and I just - I just forgot. Wouldn’t listen. Someone - a friend - died. It was my fault.’

‘What happened to your friend?’

‘He saved us. Apparated us away. But he got stabbed, just as we apparated.’

‘Harry.’

Dumbledore's voice was soft.

'I can't say I know entirely what you have been through, or even a small fraction of it. But you are a subject of circumstance. You are the Boy-Who-Lived, the man whose job it is to be in control and to lead. And with leading comes responsibility, and with responsibility, guilt. You can never save everyone, Harry, no matter how desperately you want to."

'I just think that, no matter what I do, people would be better off if I wasn't there at all. In the long run.'

'Would Mr Weasley and Miss Granger agree? I find that when you can't listen to yourself, listen to your friends. They are almost always right.'

Harry thought of them and smiled. He was more than grateful that he had them here - didn't know how he would manage to stay sane otherwise.

'We can try Occlumency again on Friday evening, if that suits you. There are books in the Restricted Section which are useful to read. You may have done that before.'

'Yeah,' Harry said. 'My professor thought I was a lost cause.'

'He said that?'

'He turned out to be a Death Eater. For Snape, that was basically praise.'

Dumbledore made Harry take his memories back and the minute that silvery strand touched his head, he was seeing them again in perfect clearness, a cinema in front of his eyes.

'My door is always open,' Dumbledore said, as Harry made to leave. 'Even at whatever odd hour the notion occurs to you.'

'Thanks,' Harry said. He pushed the door until it clicked shut and made his way down the hall.

There was a snake in the Slytherin Common Room. It had a long,

brown body with a hooded head and scales that glittered in the greenish light.

Harry was not impressed.

It was wrapped around Riddle's arm, like a small version of Nagini. He knew it was dangerous - some sort of cobra. It slithered over his arm, tongue flickering. Avery had jerked backwards in his seat, watching Riddle with horror and fascination and a disturbing amount of awe.

The other Slytherins all looked impressed at the display of Parseltongue, fully reminded Riddle was the *heir* of Slytherin. With the looks on their faces, it was no surprise they did anything he asked.

But Harry didn't hear the hisses the others heard. Instead he heard Riddle talking, about the Chamber and the Basilisk, to the stupid snake. It sounded a lot less impressive.

He was blocking it out and barely noticed at all until the hissing became louder. Loud and right beside him.

Harry looked up. 'Is that supposed to scare me?' He eyed the cobra.

'Of course not,' Riddle said. 'I simply thought you looked lonely over here.'

'You did, did you?' Harry raised his eyebrows. 'What can I say? I'm a very private person.'

'Or you're deliberately antagonising me.'

Harry scoffed. 'This is what I don't get. Why do you think everything has to be about you?'

'Because, Harry - 'he lowered his voice. It was almost a purr. 'In this house, everything *is* about me.'

The snake was watching Harry with beady black eyes.

'What do you want then?' he finally said. 'An oath that I am now a Dark Wizard, sworn to kill muggles?'

'Sounds nice,' Riddle agreed.

Harry did a double-take. But he was joking, as strange as it seemed.

'I would like to take a walk.'

'Great,' Harry said. 'You have legs. Go walk.'

Riddle's eyes narrowed.

'If you would be so kind, *dear*, would you join me?'

No.

'Why not.'

He stood up and Riddle looked pleased. Like he had won. Harry kept his emotions in check but inside he was seething. Bottling all his annoyance up for later. No matter what Dumbledore said, Harry couldn't go near him without feeling angry.

Riddle put the snake down and it slunk away. They went out the entrance. Though he wasn't much taller than Harry, Riddle had long strides, crossing the corridor in a couple of steps and started down another one.

'I don't like to have enemies,' Riddle said, after a moment of walking.

Harry frowned. 'Everyone has enemies.'

Especially you.

'You'll find I can be very . . . agreeable.'

'Bullshit, Riddle.'

Riddle stopped walking and turned to face him. 'Do you usually call people by their last names?'

Harry smirked. 'Yes, actually. There's *Dumbledore* and *Slughorn*. And then, of course, *Hagrid.'*

'Hagrid? That third-year half-breed?'

'Of course you would call someone a half-breed. What happened to being friends with everyone?'

'That's the thing, *Harry*. Sometimes my patience runs out. Half-giant, would you prefer that? How about *expelled* for killing a student. Have I redeemed him yet for you?'

Harry clenched his fists.

'I don't have enemies,' Riddle continued. 'Because disagreeing with me is not very enjoyable. You would have to be a fool. And *lying* to me - well, I do pity you.'

'Oh, yeah?'

It was the jab at Hagrid. The smug, arrogant look on Riddle's face, so used to getting his way. The snake wrapped around him earlier, to show off.

So insufferable - so *vile* - Harry wanted to punch him in the face.

'You don't scare me.'

'Then you're an idiot. Do you like the Slytherins ignoring you? It could be worse, I suppose. You still sleep in the dorm. And Abraxas is still conflicted. Poor Abraxas. Should I make up his mind for him?'

Harry ignored the question. 'You have them all wrapped around your finger,' he said. 'Fed them shit about muggleborns being bad. About being able to give them power. With your *little club*. What did you say it was - a revolution?'

He snorted. 'You think because you speak Parseltongue everyone should worship you. Well, you're wrong, Riddle. And I'll prove it.'

Riddle's face darkened. 'What are you going to do? Taunt me with your Quidditch ambitions? You are *nothing* compared to me.'

A second later, his wand was in his hand, a flash of pale wood twirling between his fingers. 'And I will find out why you're lying. *Legilimens.'*

It was like someone had stabbed him in the head with a butcher's knife. No delicacy, no finesse. Just memories being ripped apart, flashing past like bright spots . . .

Dumbledore's office from earlier. The Pensieve swirling between them. Ginny in her bridesmaid dress. Laughter clear and loud and harsh. Dazzling green light. His mother screaming.

And Harry knew nothing except that Riddle was in his head and it was *wrong*. So wrong, everything he had feared. He couldn't see this, he wasn't allowed to read his mind -

The next moment, Harry was holding his wand - when had that happened? - and the images had disappeared, replaced by Riddle's

face.

‘Did you just hex me?’ he said, slowly and disbelievingly.

‘You tried to read my mind!’

‘I *did* read your mind. And I’m surprised. I didn’t know you hated me *that much.* ’

Harry didn’t have time to think anything but *oh shit.*

Riddle didn’t make a sound but he was waving his wand and there was no time to think. Harry jumped out of the way as red light streaked at him. His wand tugged in his fingers as the spell grazed past.

'Stupefy,’ he said.

Riddle stepped to the left, batting it away. His eyes looked red in the flickering light.

'Expelliarmus,’ Harry said. ‘Bombarda.'

Riddle blocked them both, sent them batting to the ground like flies. He waved his wand and purple light zigzagged through the air, sizzling hot, burning. Harry raised a shield and it bounced off. The shield buckled, beginning to collapse.

More spells - all bright, sizzling light at rapid speed. Riddle’s wandwork was getting faster the more Harry dodged.

Something hit the ground in front of him and exploded. There was a cloud of black dust and he couldn’t see anything. Didn’t know anything except that it hurt. Through the light - the *pain* - he managed to shout, 'Expelliarmus.'

Riddle's wand gave a little jerk in his hand but did not sail to him.

Harry’s head was too heavy, he was dizzy on his feet and the shield had collapsed.

Incendio.

His last, desperate wishes worked.

The bottom of Riddle's robes caught on fire. Flames came licking up from the ground around his feet and he leapt into the air,

momentarily distracted. Harry took that split-second as his chance.

‘Flipendo.’

There was a bang like a gunshot. Through the dust and smoke, Riddle flew backwards, struck for the very first time, and hit against the wall with a thump. Without giving him any time to recover, Harry went forward, his wand still raised.

‘Expelliarmus.’

Weakly, Riddle batted it away. His wand was loose in his fingers, all his effort into standing upright.

Harry reaches forward to pluck it from his fingers and Riddle snarled, reaching at Harry’s robes, *clawing* at him like a rabid dog. He didn’t utter a spell, but every nerve in Harry’s body erupted in pain.

He was on fire. On fire from the inside out.

His mouth opened in a noise of strangled surprise, but instead of backing away, he grabbed Riddle’s robes and slammed him back into the wall. His head made a noise - a heavy wet thump - and the pain stopped.

'*Don’t* mess with me, Riddle,’ he muttered.

Riddle’s lips curled upwards, but no noise came from his mouth. He looked on the verge of a concussion, only staying up through sheer will. Or maybe it was Harry’s hands pinning him to the wall.

He hadn’t noticed until that moment, but he was grasping Riddle’s shoulders tightly, restraining him against the wall. Up close, his eyes really were red. It was not a trick of the light.

Red, red, red, red.

‘Your stupid games are over,’ he said. ‘Stop annoying me. Stop trying to find out my secrets. I am not one of your little Slytherins.’

His head was pounding with blood, adrenaline, anger.

’Trust me, you’ll regret it.’

The moment he stepped back, Riddle slumped to the ground. He didn’t say anything. Only *watched.*

There was a spot of blood on the wall, almost black in the light, from where his head had hit it.

Harry felt sick. He backed out of the corridor before someone saw.

What had he done? What was *wrong* with him?

Riddle saw him as a threat now and there was nothing he could do.

Enemy. He had officially made himself Riddle's enemy.

The adrenaline rush has died away and with it his anger. He would never catch Riddle off guard again. In fact, he would probably be attacked by the whole of Slytherin House or the *Basilisk*.

Myrtle. Oh god, he would be the next Moaning Myrtle.

And Riddle knew – knew that Harry hated him. Even worse, he saw Harry as a threat, not a weak, Quidditch-loving student any more.

Harry wandered down corridor after corridor, grateful it was empty. Deeper into the dungeons and away from Riddle and the entrance to the Common Room. How could he go back now? Sleep in the dorm?

He reached a bathroom, pulled the door open and took one look in the mirror. His cheek was slashed open - when had that happened? - and his face was smeared in that dark dust Riddle had conjured. Carefully, he brushed it away.

As he gripped the sink, he came to the realisation that he *had* to go back. If he didn't, he would seem scared. Weak.

And whatever Riddle was going to do . . .

It would only be worse.

Tom got to his feet with a wince. The corridor was empty, silent except for the noise of footsteps walking away. He tentatively touched the back of his head and his fingers came back red.

Flipendo. A *second-year* spell.

Clenching his teeth, he healed it and began to pace.

Harry Potter had caught him off guard. He hadn't expected the speed he moved at, or how fast his instincts were, despite what he saw in Defence Class. Harry fought like he had been doing it his entire life, muscle memory guiding his hands and feet. He fought like it was life or death.

And Tom hadn't expected it. Hadn't seen anyone truly like it.

Power was enough when it came to the Slytherins.

But this -

He beat him.

For a second, Tom considered following him, stalking down that corridor and ripping him *in half*.

But he couldn't. If he was going to ruin Harry's life, he had to be subtle about it. Strike when it was least expected. And Tom was good at surprise.

He still hadn't found out Harry's secret. What he saw in his mind were flashes. Dumbledore . . . A Pensieve . . .

He had lessons with him? Whatever for?

Tom smoothed down his hair and walked back to the Common Room. His pride stung. Rage, like poison, ran through him. He was in charge; *he* was going to be the Dark Lord.

And Harry Potter - secretive, stubborn Harry Potter who had *beaten* him - was not going to stop that.

Tom didn't say anything to the Slytherins, though they were so pathetic they would dance around the Great Hall if he wanted.

He could make Harry's life miserable. Make him a pariah. An outcast. He could shun him from the entire house, make his life so miserable he would have to sleep outside the Gryffindor Portrait Hole every night. Tom wanted him to *beg*.

But he didn't do any of this. Because he *was* going to find out what Harry Potter was hiding. Even if it meant hurting his only two friends.

Plans were going through his head, so many ways to make him miserable. He could tamper with the next Quidditch Match, have his broom break in the sky. Have him *die.*

An accident down the stairs. A trip to the Forbidden Forest in the middle of the night. A potion gone wrong, erasing all of his memories.

But when he went to bed that night - millions of thoughts racing in his head - something changed his mind entirely. That night he *dreamed.*

He was in a cupboard.

There was a spider in the corner and a dim bulb dangling near his head. His legs were cramped and his bladder felt like it was going to burst. His hands – small and thin - rapped on the cupboard door.

'Please, Aunt Petunia, I need the toilet.'

How long had he been here? Hours? Days?

The door opened and a thin, horse-faced woman was looming over him. 'Come straight back, boy. I'll be waiting.'

He darted under her arm and ran across a hall. The carpet under his feet was a paisley-pink and the walls were the greenish-brown of cat vomit. He reached a door - pulled it open -

There was a boy standing there, blond, pink-faced and severely overweight. He had at least six chins that wobbled when he spoke.

'What are you doing, *freak?'*

Then the boy began to grow.

The fat disappeared as he shot upwards; straw-blonde hair turned limp and black, hanging like greasy tendrils down a sallow face. Rancid breath, a voice that *hissed.* Long, black robes pooling over the ground.

'What did I tell you?' The man said. '*Control* yourself. Do you need

another lesson?'

A wand was in his hands. Green light - the Killing Curse - was coming straight for his face.

The last thing Tom heard was a voice. It sounded like a woman screaming.

He woke up.

The screaming had stopped, the green light gone. He sat up, climbed from the bed and went out of the Common Room. The corridors were dark, suits of armour casting long shadows. He went up the staircases, his wand lighting the way.

Tom was not a stranger to nightmares. To fears of his own death. Him standing there, immobile, helpless to prevent it. He had been called many things in his life: a devil, an angel, a witch's child. But a freak wasn't one of them.

Into a bathroom, shining his wand around the sinks. His mind was perfectly clear.

'Open.'

That dream had not been his. Somehow, impossibly, he knew who it belonged to. He had heard that screaming before. For a split-second, while doing Legilimency.

But it was enough. He was certain.

The dream had not been Tom's. It had been *Harry's*.

Chapter End Notes

> That's the end of part one! I really hoped you liked it. Next, we're into a lot more of Tom and Harry's actual relationship. It should be . . . interesting! ;D

A Half-Truth

Part II

Harry was leaving the Slytherin Common Room before anyone had a chance to talk to him. To *confront* him. Whatever Riddle had told the others—whatever had gone on—he didn't want to find out.

His eyes were heavy with all the sleep he had missed. So long he had lay there, his wand in his hand, listening in the dark. Hours and hours stretching on, both centuries and minutes, until his brain slowed down and sleep came, unwelcome.

He went up the stairs and saw Ron's ginger head outside the Great Hall, Hermione beside him.

'You're not going to believe it,' Harry said, coming up behind them at once. 'But I fucked up.'

Ron spun around and let out a snort of laughter. Hermione blinked like an owl.

'Trust me I can believe it,' Ron muttered, beginning to grin.

It vanished when Harry explained what had happened the previous night.

'There's nothing we can do now,' Hermione said, sounding downcast. 'Whatever Riddle's going to do, it will happen anyway.'

'I don't suppose you could convince him it was all a misunderstanding?' Ron said, looking as doubtful at his own suggestion as Harry did.

'I haven't seen him yet. I left as fast as I could.'

Harry didn't *want* to see Riddle and face the horrors he would surely cause.

'Whatever he does, it's not going to be good.' Ron shivered. 'We should tell Dumbledore.'

‘He can’t do anything,’ Hermione said. ‘There is absolutely no proof Riddle is - the way he is. All the professors love him. And no professor is going to take a student’s side during a *fight.’*

Her words snuffed out the last of his hope. ‘Let’s plan my funeral then,’ Harry said, ‘Maybe I’ll take Riddle down with me and you two can get back to the future. That might be fun.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

Hermione pursed her lips. *’Lie* to him. Say whatever you have to. Don’t goad him. And for god’s sake, Harry, stop losing your temper!’

‘He was reading my mind!’

‘You should have at least pretended you’re weak at magic. Riddle will see that as a challenge. Do you think anyone has ever beaten him before?’

‘Maybe he needs a challenge,’ Ron muttered.

Hermione gave him a nasty look. ‘I can’t *believe* you two.’ She was speaking through clenched teeth. ‘It’s not a competition, it’s about getting back to the future. And not letting *Tom Riddle* know all our secrets.’

‘What happened to exposing him?’ Harry said.

‘That was *before* all of this! I think we have enough problems without making it worse.’ Her nostrils flared.

‘Good point,’ Ron said.

A group of students walked past, eyeing them curiously. Harry waited until they went into the Hall. ‘What do you think I should do then?’

‘‘Tell Riddle to piss off or you’ll make him,’ Ron said.

‘Say it was a misunderstanding,’ was Hermione’s answer.

Harry shook his head. ‘A misunderstanding? We haven’t had a little squabble over homework. He knows I *hate* him.’

‘Well, good luck,’ said Ron. ‘You could always hex him so bad he’s in the hospital-wing for a month. Or fake dragon-pox. That way you’ll be in confinement. Strictly *no* visitors.’

Harry thought about it for a moment.

‘Hermione’s right,’ he said, glancing at her. ‘Well, sort of. I can’t hide. Or do . . . *that* , Ron. It will make things worse. I just need to act like an idiot with anger problems.’

‘Wait, *what?’*

'I’m kidding.’

Harry smirked. ‘I was thinking about earlier. When you said to *lie.* If I make up something to completely put him off the scent - ‘

‘Risky with the mind-reading and all,’ said Ron.

‘– then he’ll never figure out the real reason I hate him. He’s just a student. He may have a cult and Horcruxes but we’ve dealt with *adult* Voldemort and survived.’

Hermione looked impressed.

‘But today you’re going to think up this plan. We all are. So that means for now, ignore and don’t annoy.’

‘Ignore and don’t annoy,’ Harry repeated, like a five-year-old learning the alphabet. He grinned at them. ‘How hard can it be?’

Ignore and don’t annoy lasted a grant total of five hours. Harry tried, he could say that with certainty. Classes were spent away from all the Slytherins. He didn’t dare look near Riddle in case he caught his eye. As the day went on, he began to feel restless, jumpy.*Nothing* had changed.

Instead of releasing hell on earth, Riddle had done the opposite. Belinda smiled at Harry in Transfiguration, as though nothing had happened. Abraxas cornered him the moment first class ended, shuffling his feet awkwardly.

‘I know I said you not being part of anything in Slytherin made things awkward.’ He was wringing his hands. ‘And it’s true. But I don’t want to not be friends.’

You can't have everything, a little voice in Harry's head said. He ignored it.

'I thought you didn't care about my - *beliefs?* Wasn't that your first words?'

'I don't, personally. But it makes things complicated. Riddle -' he stopped, and it evoked the feet shuffling and fidgeting.

'*What* about Riddle?'

'Nothing,' Abraxas said. 'It doesn't matter anymore.'

Harry said nothing. Abraxas didn't seem to know about Harry's fight with Riddle last night – but what did Harry know?

Anything could be going on in the house, anything at all. And Harry didn't know because he wasn't *part of it.*

Whatever was going on in Slytherin, he was going to find out. All the Death Eater meetings and secret conversations. The plans. He was going to find out how Riddle managed to make everyone so eager to please him. It was time to put the Invisibility Cloak to good use.

When classes ended, Harry quickly went out the door, intent to meet Hermione and Ron and decide what to do. The cloak was risky but it rarely failed. And who would suspect it? Harry needed to find out what Riddle was going to do and what the others knew.

Only the minute he got into the corridor, mind swimming with ideas, someone stepped into his path. Like a cloud falling over the sun, his very presence was sinister. The Head Boy badge was gleaming.

'Harry,' Riddle said. There was no smile this time. His face was about as hard and cold as Harry had ever seen it.

'Follow me.'

He took off down the corridor without looking back.

Harry hesitated a moment. But despite his instincts, despite the voice in his head that sounded a lot like Hermione, Harry *did* follow, not sure if he was being led to his death but willing to find out.

He shoved his hands in his pockets, felt the reassuring wood of his wand.

He's seventeen. He's not Voldemort. You have faced worse.

The thoughts brought little comfort. Riddle walked until they reached the end of the corridor. Students were milling in the opposite direction, towards Common Rooms, outside, and the Great Hall.

Leaving them nice and alone.

'You don't suppose we could call this a big misunderstanding?' Harry said.

Riddle's face didn't change in the slightest, staying flat and hard and expressionless. The voices of the students died away. There was a silence that seemed to stretch on forever.

'I was going to rip your mind apart,' Riddle finally said.

'But you had a sudden change of heart?'

'I could make every single person in this school hate you. I could find the information I wanted and leave you worse than any Dementor would.'

Harry couldn't help himself. 'You could do worse than suck out my *soul?'*

Riddle's lips curled upwards, the first hint of anger breaking through his façade.

'I could *ruin* you. Along with your two Gryffindors. It would be exceedingly enjoyable.'

'Then why aren't you?' Harry said. 'Or is this just the little speech beforehand?'

Riddle's eyes flashed. For a second, Harry thought he was going to curse him and braced himself, fingers seconds away from bringing out his wand.

'Unfortunately not.' Riddle's voice was soft, despite everything. Low and soft and steady. 'What I *really* want to know is how you got into my head.'

Whatever Harry had imagined Riddle would say, it wasn't that.

'In *your* head? Are you forgetting the part where you tried to read my mind?'

Riddle laughed – low and cold and mocking. '*Don't* play stupid.'

There was a flash of light and Harry was crashing against the wall, black spots blurring his vision. He didn't have time to grab his wand – hadn't even seen Riddle move.

And he couldn't breathe.

His hands went to his neck but there was nothing there. For a minute he spluttered, choking, clawing at his throat and trying to undo the spell. Instead of words were gasps and garbles. His head was filling with pressure, a dim buzz was getting louder and louder – his mind was ready to burst -

Then it stopped.

Harry gasped in lungfuls of air. 'What the - *fuck?* I don't know what you're talking about!'

Riddle, his face marred with anger, had never looked more like Voldemort. 'I could force you to answer me. Would you prefer that? It would save us both all this time and effort.'

Harry met his gaze, stared straight up into his face. 'I don't have a clue what you're on about.' His voice was raspy, raw, not at all like he had imagined it. 'So, if you would like to *explain* instead of going all psychotic.'

Riddle titled his head. 'Very well. How did I receive a dream of yours last night despite having the strongest Occlumency in the school?'

'A *dream*?'

Harry's voice rose in shock, his heart beginning to thud. 'What sort of dream?'

'It wasn't pleasant. I believe you would call it a*nightmare.*'

Harry scoffed. 'How do you know it's mine and not just your crazy imagination?'

'I have my reasons.'

Riddle's eyebrows furrowed. He was staring at Harry with such an intensity he squirmed. 'If you're lying to me -'

'I'm not! Why would I send you my dream? Is that even possible?'

‘It’s even *less* possible if you were unaware of it. Though I suppose, it *isn’t* the sort of thing you would show someone.’

‘What do you mean?’

Riddle smirked, and Harry didn’t like the look in his eyes one bit. ‘Do you often dream about being locked in a cupboard?’

Harry’s heart stopped. Whatever expression was on his face just made Riddle’s smirk grow - grow and grow into something cruel.

‘Or is this a recent development? A symbol of your imprisonment here? Are you *scared?’*

‘Of what? Cobwebs and window cleaner?’

Riddle’s lips twitched for a second before his face was impassive once again.

‘Why did I receive this?’

‘I don’t know.’

Riddle was fiddling with his wand, twirling it through his fingers in a mocking display of power.

‘Are you lying? You have quite the habit.’

‘No.’

‘Then how -’ he was almost hissing- ‘did I get it?’

Riddle was a trembling ball of rage, his face dark with anger, eyes flashing, lips curled up in a snarl.

'I don't know!’ Harry exclaimed. ‘I know you think I'm lying but I’m not! I don't know why you're having my - my bloody *nightmares!'*

His heart was plummeting so hard and fast Riddle must have been able to hear it. The force of the words echoed off the stone walls and down the corridor.

'If I do believe you,' Riddle said carefully. 'That still doesn't explain what it means. And you are hiding something.'

'It's got nothing to do with - '

'Stop lying to me.'

A second later, Harry buckled over in pain. It felt like something was tearing his insides apart, digging through him. And yet Riddle hadn't used his wand.

‘We’ve already established you’re hiding something. Not to mention your little bouts of - *hatred.’*

'Fine! I don't know why you had my dream - I *don't* - but I have a theory. If you would stop attacking me - '

'You don't think it's fair? A little bit of retaliation?'

'No. I think you're ridiculous. You tried to read my mind! What was I going to do - turn your hair pink?'

Riddle folded his arms. 'You haven't explained your theory.'

Harry hesitated.

Please make this not ruin everything.

'It's the wands. Or that's the best guess I have. When I went to Ollivanders, he said they have the same core. Mine and yours.'

'Which is?'

'Phoenix feathers. You *know* that. From Dumbledore's phoenix. They're twin wands.'

'Twin wands?’ His voice raised doubtfully. ‘Which let me see your dream?'

'I don't know! Sharing a core is rare and I don’t study wandlore. It was just an idea.'

Riddle seemed to think about this. Harry held his breath.

He *didn't* know. That was the truth. It didn't make sense as to why Riddle would have his dreams. The connection with Voldemort shouldn't be there. He had never tried to kill Harry as a baby.

‘Prove it.’

‘I’m sorry - what?’

‘Prove they’re twin wands.’

‘Ok.’

Harry blinked in surprise. ‘Er - give me your wand.’

Riddle just raised his eyebrows.

‘Maybe not. Obviously. Try and curse me.’

‘Why?’

‘You need a reason?’ He rolled his eyes. ‘They won’t let us hurt each other. Just do it.’

There was no hesitation. A flash of blue light was coming straight at him and Harry fired back Expelliarmus . The two streams of light hit together but instead of passing through, they formed a thick, golden chain.

Priori Incantatem.

The last time this had happened was in the graveyard and a ghost of Cedric and his parents had come from the wand. This time there was nothing.

Only a long line of light stretching between both of them, too bright to look at. Harry held the connection for one second, two, five, before letting it go.

‘We can’t harm each other. Much.’

‘Twin wand cores,’ Riddle breathed. ‘Are extremely rare.’

His eyes were very bright, this time with wonder.

‘But I still don’t see how *wands* -’

‘You said they’re rare,’ Harry interrupted. ‘So, you don’t know. No-one does. There isn’t any research on it.’

‘You’re saying that because of having the same wand-cores, we share some kind of connection?’

Harry tried to hide his revulsion. Riddle looked both horrified and fascinated, his face coming alive, looking a way Harry didn’t want to think too closely on.

‘I don’t know. You could ask a professor.’

‘No.’

He knew Riddle would say no. Knew it would help prove he was being honest.

‘I am not going to a professor about my wand and *your* dreams.’

‘They might recommend St. Mungo’s,’ Harry agreed.

That could save us all a lot of trouble.

‘It’s much too interesting. The same wand cores. A connection. But you’re still hiding something. *Why* exactly do you hate me?’

He waited, but Harry only shook his head. ‘You’re arrogant and annoying. And I told you to stop messing with me.’

He stepped out of the way, putting distance between them. It was like being around a wild dog . . . just one wrong move . . .

‘Could you make those lies sound any faker?’

Harry pretended to consider it. ‘Maybe. I’ll think about it on the way to the Great Hall.’

He began to walk down the corridor. Far, far away.

‘You’re a fool if you think this is over,’ Riddle called.

‘What about you just leave me alone?’

‘Now? I don’t think I could if I *wanted* to.’

Harry’s heart-rate didn’t settle the entire day. He knew it wasn’t over. In fact, maybe he had just made things worse.

Riddle was going to research wands now, come up with a dozen theories and wrong conclusions. Only *would* they be wrong?

The most unsettling thing about the situation was that Harry didn’t know himself. Riddle was right. The situation was far from over.

‘He’s having my dreams,’ he told Ron and Hermione. ‘And I don’t know how to stop it. I don’t even know how this is *possible.’*

He lowered his voice. *‘Voldemort* couldn’t see through my eyes. It’s like the connection we have - it’s stronger here.’

Stronger and far more dangerous.

‘Riddle’s not going to give up,’ Hermione said. She played with the hem of her jumper then looked up, serious. ‘Harry, this could be *bad.’*

‘You’re in a right mess if you ask me,’ Ron said.

‘Oh, thanks for that.’ Harry gave him a dirty look. ‘Very helpful.’

‘You know me. Ron Mr Helpful Weasley.’

‘Is that what the Prefect Badge said?’

‘It’s going to be a right mess,’ Ron continued. ‘But he won’t give up now. Especially that he knows about the wands.

Harry chewed his lip. ‘You’re right. But wands are safer than whatever else he could discover. And the *dream?* He’s not going to give up.’

That evening, Harry slipped the Invisibility Cloak from the bottom of his trunk and pulled it over his head. The dorms were empty and he practiced walking back and forth in front of the mirror without making a sound.

The cloak was perfect, the charms placed on it having not faded in the slightest, despite its travel through time.

A Deathly Hallow.

Only that did not matter anymore. It was just Harry and his trusty cloak, his most prized possession. It wouldn’t let him down.

He made his way to the Common Room, not meeting anyone on the stairs. It was packed, students of all ages crammed together. He felt odd standing there. Exposed.

Though it wasn't true, he imagined if a student squinted, they would see his outline and discover him. Imagined, by a stroke of bad luck, Riddle would *sense* him.

Quietly, Harry walked over to where the Seventh Years sat, mindful of the material rustling against the ground.

Riddle was sitting in the throne-like chair beside the fire. The rest of the Slytherins surrounded him. Harry stood there, careful not to make any noise, more aware of his breathing than ever. But no-one glanced around, no-one's conversation stilled. Gradually he began to relax; to listen.

Only they weren't talking about anything important.

Lucretia Black was complaining about her Ancient Runes homework and Abraxas was agreeing with a dramatic sigh. Alphard Black was reading a Quidditch magazine and ignoring everybody. Belinda had her eyes closed, her head tilted towards the fire, like a content house-cat.

And Riddle . . .

Riddle was only sitting there, looking off into the distance, his eyes faraway.

What was he thinking? About the wands? The dreams? The secrets?

Harry continued to stand there. Something had to happen, didn't it? Maybe they were just waiting . . . He turned back to Riddle, who was still staring vacantly. He had that snake slithering over his chair, its beady head in the air.

Hopefully it couldn't sense him. Though if it did – and told Riddle – Harry would hear as well.

The conversation died away and moved onto another topic: Grindelwald.

'I personally think he's going to reach Britain,' Rosier said. 'When he builds up a bigger following. They say he's scared of *Dumbledore.'*

He laughed.

'Grindelwald doesn't care for Britain,' Belinda said, scoffing. 'It's too muggle-loving. Full of squibs and weak magic.'

She turned to Riddle.

'But I suppose that could change.'

He smiled at her, looking confident. Lounging in his throne like a god.

Harry fidgeted on the spot, his legs beginning to get stiff. Did they know he was there? Was that it? Eventually, some of the younger students cleared out of the Common Room, leaving only the older ones, who came to stand around the fire.

Harry held his breath as a boy walked past him, so close he nearly brushed against his arm. Close – so close – a fraction away –

The boy moved on and he breathed out.

And then finally- finally - Riddle stood up. 'My friends,' he said, looking at each of them. 'Things are quiet now, not a whisper of change in the air. But it will come. This country - this weak, muggle country - will become a kingdom.'

He looked very tall standing there and very handsome. Self-assured, like the Minister of Magic giving a speech.

'A kingdom of powerful wizards, powerful blood. Over muggles we will rule. Free to practice any magic we like. Ancient magic, Dark magic. Magic you can only dream of. And all of you will help see it happen.'

Faces were staring at him - some eager, some wistful, some almost hungry. Like them, Harry couldn't look away.

'Any job you can dream of, you shall have. Any place you wish to go will be possible. Any vengeance you wish to achieve. *Power.* We will have ultimate power.'

'What about the Ministry?' Lucretia said.

Riddle smiled.

'Spencer-Moon, the Minister, will be resigning soon. And whoever takes his place . . . could make all the difference.'

'We'll be able to kill mudbloods?' Rosier said. His voice had a heavy, longing quality and Harry's face scrunched up in distaste.

'With Purebloods in control, there will be no more mudbloods. Dirty

blood will be gone. You can hunt as many as you like.'

How do they want this?

'And Alphard,' Riddle said. 'With your family's allegiance, you are assured absolute power. Anything you want.'

Alphard's face was impassive.

'Even -' Riddle said. 'An entirely new start. The ties you hold with your family could disappear. I can ensure you safety, a life to dictate for yourself. You would no longer be tied down under your parents' rule.'

Alphard was nodding, slowly, and Harry thought about Sirius. What would he say if someone offered him a way to get away from his family and have a life for himself? Power? A new name to make his own?

'Safety. Opportunity. A chance to finally prove yourself against anyone who did you wrong.'

'What about Dumbledore?' Abraxas said. 'He would never allow us to harm a precious mudblood.'

Harry felt sick at hearing that. Wanted to grab Abraxas, shake him, tell him he was right there and this was *wrong*.

But he didn't think he could change his mind, which was what he wanted most of all.

'Dumbledore is powerful. Influential. But he is only one man. And one man against a thousand doesn't stand a chance. Dumbledore will bow down when we are finished. Beg for his life.'

Yeah right.

'The power we shall have . . . '

We.

But there was no we. There was only Voldemort.

'After Hogwarts, we will build ourselves up. Slowly, gradually. Professor Slughorn . . . is particularly useful.'

'You could be Minister,' Avery said, sounding eager. 'Old Sluggy would

do anything you asked.'

There were murmurs of agreement.

'I will not rule from an office,' Riddle said. 'But you could, Harold, if that is your wish.'

Lies, Harry thought. He was only telling them what they wanted to hear.

He doesn't care about you, any of you.

He had forgotten about the pain in his legs and the itch to walk around. Riddle spoke with an assurance, a certainty that wasn't to be questioned.

'But now at Hogwarts,' he continued. 'There is nothing to do but learn. Train. The time will come.'

‘What about Potter?’ Rosier asked, almost spitting out the words. ‘The muggle-lover. He needs to be watched.’

Everyone seemed to lean forward. Harry saw Abraxas frown, and felt a surge of gratefulness.

‘Harry Potter is not your concern. Show him the same respect you would any other. Slytherin is united, are we not? Even to a *traitor.’*

‘He could cause trouble for you,’ Avery said hesitantly. He looked scared to get Riddle’s disapproval. ‘With Dumbledore.’

‘They’re close, aren’t they?’ Riddle mused. ‘That could change. Whatever happens, Harry is *mine* to deal with.’

Harry couldn’t suppress a shiver at the way Riddle said his name. Couldn’t he just call him Potter? Harry didn’t go around saying *Tom.*

Mine to deal with.

Harry had only made things worse. Riddle wasn’t going to leave him alone. He was going to do the opposite.

He didn’t tell the Death Eaters about the fight.

‘This just makes things more interesting.’

When Riddle finished talking, disappointment filled Harry. He had

found out nothing of any importance.

Riddle had the whole house wrapped around his finger, just like he claimed. Had gotten all the Slytherins – the scared, the power-hungry, the lonely – and promised them a start. Made them *believe* it.

The interesting stuff over, Harry moved away, holding his breath as he went through the crowd, hoping no-one would unexpectedly move. The cloak would occasionally flap around his ankles, exposing small slivers of his shoes.

Nearly there, nearly there.

He reached the bottom of the stairs when the floor creaked.

Harry froze in place. No-one had noticed except Belinda, who was staring right where Harry stood with a frown.

One second passed then two. He didn't dare move. Then Belinda shook herself and turned around.

Harry let out his breath and waited until she started talking to Lucretia before moving again.

Close, too close.

Slowly, ever so carefully, he went up the stairs.

Harry was confronted by Riddle almost the minute he woke. Still groggy, he had stepped into the bathroom, expecting the usual emptiness there was at this time in the morning. Instead was Riddle, perfectly pristine, not a hair out of place.

Harry was a stark contrast, his hair messier than ever, wearing a rumpled t-shirt that had belonged to Bill Weasley at one point.

His sleepiness vanished the minute he saw Riddle and he touched his glasses to make sure this was real.

What the hell.

'Er . . .' Harry said, sighing. 'Sleep well?'

‘No. And do you know why?’

‘An uncomfortable mattress?’

‘I was reading. About wand connections.’

Of course he was.

‘Did you know magic performed together by twin wands will be ten times more powerful?’

‘Can’t say I did.’

‘But this *dream* business. It doesn’t seem normal. It doesn’t tie up with anything I’ve read.’

Harry shrugged. ‘Your guess is as good as mine. I’ve already told you, *I don’t know.’*

Riddle’s eyes narrowed. Harry knew meeting him here was not a coincidence at all.

To delay the inevitable, he began to brush his teeth - the muggle way, hoping it would distract him. It didn’t.

‘I don’t like it.’

Harry spat out a mouthful of toothpaste. ‘Well, it isn’t all sunshine for me either. You think I *want* you having my dreams?’

‘I don’t think this is good for *either* of us considering we don’t know what’s causing it. Or how it will manifest.’

‘*Oh*,’ Harry said. ‘You don’t want it to go both ways.’

Riddle didn’t want his evil plans revealed to Harry in a dream. Of course.

Harry turned off the tap. ‘Well, it hasn’t yet. I’ve slept like a baby. No weird dreams.’

Except orphanages, of course.

‘That doesn’t matter,’ Riddle said. Do you want some sort of connection to me? That we don’t know about? ‘

‘No. You know I don’t, Riddle, so what’s this about?’

‘I want to know what you’re hiding.’

Harry opened his mouth but didn’t get a chance to speak. *Shit, shit, oh shit.*

‘Because *this* is a hindrance. And you have been lying since you got here. I saw your mind, Harry. So angry. You don’t just dislike me, you *hate* me. And hatred like that doesn’t come for no reason.’

Harry’s wand was on his bedside table and he had never felt more lost. He cursed himself for being so stupid. How could he defend himself now? With his toothbrush?

‘What do you know?’ Riddle said, taking a step forward, getting all into his space.

He wasn’t going to drop this. He was going to persist and persist and then rip it from Harry’s mind when he least expected it. Harry’s mouth seemed to have dried up - he tried to speak but his tongue was too heavy; dry like sandpaper, like the desert.

Riddle’s wand wasn’t in his hands but it didn’t make any difference. He didn’t need it to read Harry’s mind, could make him hurt either way.

‘You know why I hate you, Riddle? You really want to know? You pretend you’re so perfect but you’re not. You’re just a liar.’

‘And what leads you to this conclusion?’

‘Hagrid.’ Harry said the name with as much venom as he could muster. He had practiced this with Ron and Hermione.

‘You got him expelled. You framed him just so you could get a trophy. So you could become - become the great *hero*.’

Riddle’s face went from puzzled to shocked to enraged.

‘Hagrid *killed* a student with a pet Acromantula. You are sorely misinformed.’

‘No, I’m not. When we got here, we met Hagrid. Who said that he was expelled? I asked around. I saw your stupid trophy when we got a tour of the school. *Special Services to the School*. He didn’t kill that girl. You got him expelled without any proof.’

‘Is a giant spider not enough proof? What would be more suitable - a

dragon?'

'Spiders don't petrify. You think that just because he's half-giant, or not as smart as you -'

'Exactly.' His smile was cold. 'That is what I think. It doesn't matter if Hagrid killed Myrtle. They were going to close the school. The Acromantula was convenient. *He* was convenient. The dangerous half-giant. The idiot. You think anyone will bother to check if it's true? When it's so *nice* and *easy?'*

He looked confident again, assured.

'I don't care that you know I framed him. Take your concerns to Headmaster Dippet if you want. Nothing will come out of it. Because Hagrid is a monster just as much as the one that was petrifying people. *No-one* will let him go back to school or drag up that case again. So, Harry - how's that for *fair?* '

Harry wanted to punch Riddle in his stupid face. See that perfect nose crack, blood spew from it.

'Better to be a half-giant than a bigoted, narrow-minded blood-fanatic.'

Riddle *laughed* and the sound made Harry flinch.

'Keep dreaming,' he said. 'If you think anyone cares about a half-breed or a dead mudblood then you're delusional.'

'At least I'm not evil. '

He gave Riddle one final look – didn't have to fake the anger at all.

Riddle believed it because it was the truth.

Just not *all* of the truth.

Harry had no plans to let Riddle know the other reasons he hated him – the long list including the horcruxes and the killing of his muggle family. But by telling him this, he had given Riddle a plausible reason. Gave him the truth, if only part of it. Had seen his expression relax, saw the plan work.

And Harry?

Harry just needed to not slip up again.

Green Light (Filling your Head)

Hearing Riddle talk about Hagrid made Harry actually want to do something. The whole situation was unfair. It wasn't *right.* Riddle's words were echoing, over and over, in his head.

Hagrid is just as much of a monster as the one that was petrifying people.

Monster.

Half-breed.

In that moment, Harry's hatred had been all real. Acromantulas couldn't petrify people. There wasn't even any proof. But no-one cared because Myrtle was only a muggleborn and Hagrid was the half-giant to dump the blame on. It was convenient.

Maybe this was how Hermione felt about house-elves. Harry could see it now - feel the sheer *unfairness* of it burning through him. The only way to get Hagrid his education back was to expose Riddle. But exposing Riddle was too dangerous.

Harry clenched his teeth. He hated Riddle in that moment – hated being here and able to do nothing. He couldn't take Riddle's Horcruxes, couldn't do anything.

Dumbledore knew what Riddle would become. Why wasn't he doing anything? Why wasn't anyone?

Was it the potential the future would be destroyed when they got back? Was it the morality of the situation – instead of a monster, did Dumbledore see a student? Did he not realise?

Did no-one really want to dig up what happened with Hagrid? Was Riddle right, they didn't care?

He picked at the food on his plate. The only good thing was that he had successfully thwarted Riddle's suspicions. He was in the clear. Maybe Riddle would leave him alone now . . .

He pushed the eggs around with his fork and didn't notice Abraxas speaking.

'Er - Harry?'

Then someone nudged him – hard - and his head shot up.

Belinda shrugged innocently. ‘You were miles away.’

‘I was saying the first Quidditch match is next week,’ Abraxas repeated. ‘Against Ravenclaw.’

Harry shook away thoughts of Riddle, who was sitting further down the table. He deliberately avoided looking in that direction. ‘Are they the team with the mountain-troll Beaters?’

Abraxas laughed. ‘We’re not joking - you’ll believe it when you see it.’

Harry’s thoughts wandered, against his will.

Riddle and he were *connected.* It didn’t make sense. Voldemort was as well as dead here. And yet, Harry was having his dreams. . . *Riddle* was having his.

They had to break whatever was causing it and soon. The alternative didn’t bear thinking of.

There was a crash from down the table. Someone had dropped the pot of porridge. With a smash it fell and spilled everywhere. The students in the vicinity recoiled, lifting their plates out of the way.

As Harry’s eyes followed the commotion, against his will, they went straight to Riddle. Despite being a distance away, a jolt, like electricity, went through him.

Riddle was staring right at him, like he had waited for this very moment.

A second passed. Another.

Then Riddle’s mouth curled upwards, stretching into a pleased smile. Those dark eyes – sinister and dangerous and *knowing* - seemed to go straight through him.

With effort, Harry tore his gaze away.

As the week dragged on, the weather became bleaker.

One morning Harry woke to the grounds covered in a thin sheet of ice. It became unpleasant to go outdoors and wade through the muddy grass, where the rain always seemed to wait for them.

The Greenhouses were the warmest escape – Harry was increasingly grateful during Herbology to escape the cold. The Slytherin dormitories were draughty and even though there was a fireplace, it didn't do very much.

He thought wistfully of the cosy Gryffindor Common, a contrast from the cold dungeons, with the open space and drafts . He spent most of his time practicing Occlumency with Dumbledore. He had almost memorised the books in the library, and though it was better than lessons with Snape, Harry couldn't keep Dumbledore out of his mind for long.

Some people just aren't suited to it.

If Riddle had another of Harry's dreams, he didn't mention it. He was avoiding him the best he could.

Harry didn't dream of the orphanage that week, or if he did, he never remembered it when he woke up. What he did see was Ginny, with her long, shiny hair, fire in the light.

One night, he had a particularly vivid encounter with Malfoy Manor. But when he woke up, his hair sticking to his slick forehead, Riddle's curtains were drawn, only soft breathing coming from behind them.

He would think he had him entirely fooled - that they could forget about the strange connection - but there was simply no way. Because Riddle would *watch* Harry, almost constantly. He would look up and meet those dark eyes, no longer suspicious but curious. Almost amused. A cat playing with a mouse. A wolf with its eyes on a sheep. Waiting . . .

Harry couldn't accidentally reveal anything. He knew it – knew Riddle was preparing, anticipating a slip up. Planning.

Thursday morning meant Potions. When the Slytherins entered the Hall, it was to a flurry of owls. The sound of wings beating frantically, blurs of brown and white streaking through the air. The majority of his classmates received newspapers, some attached to letters from home.

Harry leaned over to read Belinda's copy of the Prophet and his

appetite disappeared at once.

Is Grindelwald Getting Closer?

He scanned the article. A family killed in France, all beheaded. Another attack in Ireland.

How long until he reaches Britain? And are we ready?

It was too much like Voldemort for Harry to think logically. He knew Grindelwald didn't take over Britain – knew he would only be a problem for a short amount of time. But all he saw were the words - *murder, muggle, close to Britain* - and it all came back.

His eyes shot to the Head Table.

Professor Dumbledore was not talking to anyone. His head was down, almost touching the paper, and his glasses were slipping down his nose.

Grindelwald had been his friend. Harry wanted to ask about that - wanted to know more than anything.

The picture in Bathilda Bagshot's house. Rita Skeeter's book.

What had changed? Could Dumbledore prevent deaths by defeating Grindelwald earlier? Was he only delaying it?

Ron was in agreement on their way to Potions.

'He could stop a load of muggles being killed,' he said. 'But think of it this way. If I went all nutter and started killing people, would you be able to lock me up so soon?'

Harry shrugged. 'Depends how much of a prat you were being.'

Ron punched him on the arm.

The good mood vanished when he saw Hermione talking to Joseph Corner. He was a tall, lanky guy with neat brown hair and a dimpled smile. And he was carrying her books.

Ron made a spluttering noise. Privately, Harry thought he sounded much like Percy when he caught students playing chess too loudly or – heaven forbid – laughing aloud. He snickered.

'Why don't you carry her books then?' Harry said, hiding his

amusement.

'Hermione's an independent woman! She doesn't need me taking her books - besides, what if I *dropped* one of them? They're her babies.'

'Imagine the *horror,'* Harry said, 'if you dropped a book.'

But Hermione didn't look like she minded at all. When she came over to them, she was beaming. 'We were talking about the principle of vanishing objects. It's so fascinating.'

Ron scowled.

'You know, Ron likes vanishing things,' Harry said, nudging him in the side.

Hermione's eyebrows flew upwards. 'You do?'

She sounded very sceptic.

'Totally,' Ron said. 'Very – fascinating. One time, mum got so mad at Bill's long hair she vanished it. That was cool. Only her spell was a little too strong. She was angry, see. And Bill wouldn't grow it back for a whole week.' He snorted. 'Served her right, I suppose.'

Harry joined in his laughter, imagining a bald Bill. Hermione's lips were tugging upwards despite her best efforts.

'Well,' she said, sitting down beside him. 'You'll have to tell Fleur that story. I'm sure she would like it.'

'Yeah, I will. Next time we see them.'

His smile fell abruptly.

There was no news about the time-turner. No idea how to get them back.

'Don't worry,' Hermione said. Her smile had become strained. 'We just need to give it time.'

Time. Almost ironic, really. How much longer would it take?

Harry had brought them here – that little detail was nagging at the corner of his mind. It was his fault.

Professor Slughorn entered the classroom, and gave the Slytherins up

the front a wave.

‘Did you ever go back to Riddle’s tutoring?’ Hermione whispered, looking slightly put-out that she wasn’t part of Slughorn’s favourites.

Harry snorted. ‘No way. And if Sluggy asks, I’ll say I go all the time. What’s Riddle going to do - *tell on me?*

‘Detention from the Head Boy,’ Ron said. ‘Merlin, Harry, what would you do? ’

They both mimed expressions of complete horror and Hermione rolled her eyes. ‘Oh, very funny,’ she said. ‘You’ll know when you fail your NEWTS.’

Ron made a loud, scandalised gasp and Harry snickered.

‘No offence,’ he said. ‘But I don’t think NEWTS are the priority right now.’

The chatter died as Slughorn began to speak. They were meant to have decided on what they were doing for their project – Harry and Ron shared a look.

‘What about we do a nice cure for boils?’ Ron suggested. ‘You can’t beat first year potions.’

‘You can’t do it *together,* ’ Hermione said. ‘Unless you suddenly lose an arm each.’

She shook her head. ‘Anyway, I’m thinking of making Polyjuice Potion again. But I want to modify the recipe – you know, for a bit of a challenge.’

‘Hermione? Modifying a recipe?’ Harry gave her a disbelieving look. ‘After all your anger at the Prince’s book last year?’

‘Don’t be clever. *Snape* gave me the idea - his modifications were just ingenious, weren’t they, Harry?’

Harry bristled at the thought of Snape.

‘Just brilliant. I particularly loved the part where he*killed Dumbledore.’*

She elbowed him, hissing to be quiet. ‘Are you mad? You can’t just say that!’

Slughorn cleared his throat before Harry could respond.

‘Attention, please! I want a work plan, a recipe and an essay based on your chosen project by the end of the month. It should be to a very high standard, not something you do a few days beforehand. That’s the Thursday before the first Hogsmeade trip. If you want to go – I suggest you have it all completed.’

The threat loomed in the air.

‘Hogsmeade,’ Harry said, turning back to Ron and Hermione. ‘We can get books. On time-travel. Maybe there’s something that’s not in the library. Something that will help us.’

Hermione’s face brightened but Ron’s fell. ‘You’re both forgetting something,’ he said, leaning forward.

‘What?’ said Hermione.

‘We don’t have any money.’

Despite the weather, the Slytherin Quidditch Team trained harder than ever. When Alphard Black was in a bad mood, practice would be downright brutal. Bludgers, along with many other transfigured objects, would chase all of them for the entire hour. There were three balls assigned to each player – and that meant no staying still in the air or stopping unless you wanted a Bludger to the face.

It was wonderful.

In the air, all Harry’s thoughts melted away. His head was clearer than ever. Wonderfully light. If it was always like that, he would have no bother with Occlumency. While flying - he was *free*.

That evening it was hail-stoning. When they finished up practice - the sky had darkened and it was getting hard to see - Harry’s hair was plastered to his forehead and his skin was red. They stood in the showers and he closed his eyes against the warm water, letting it soothe his raw skin.

Instead of making the journey up to the school, he lingered behind to talk to Alphard, taking great care in tying his shoes.

He had to be careful. Despite looking like Sirius and sounding like Sirius, Alphard was not him. Though friendly enough, he was shy and suspicious. He gave everyone the *look,* like he was expecting something to jump up from under the floorboards, yelling, *'Surprise! You've been tricked!'*

This could easily go wrong.

'We need to win this match,' Abraxas was saying. In front of a mirror, he was smoothing down his hair. Harry was reminded of Draco Malfoy and his gel, hair so slick it looked permanently wet. 'I'm serious. My father - '

A pinched expression crossed his face and he didn't continue.

'I'll try and get the snitch as soon as I see it,' Harry promised. '*What* about your father?'

Abraxas turned away from the mirror, adjusted his tie. 'He wants me to win, that's all.'

Harry gave him a sympathetic look and then glanced at Alphard. He was inspecting the bristles on his broomstick.

'That must be hard. Having so much pressure. Because you're a pureblood.'

'It's not bad,' Abraxas said immediately. 'Is it, Alphard?'

'No.' Alphard's voice was flat. 'We're lucky.'

'Yeah, *Noble and Most Ancient House of Black* and all,' Harry said. 'That's like - royalty.'

'Royalty?'

'Muggle thing. Nevermind.'

'Well, the family's very wealthy,' Alphard said. 'And we have a lot of say in the Ministry and how things are run. That's good.'

'Yeah,' Harry said. 'I was thinking of objects though. You must have loads of cool magical things. The Potters - well, they didn't exactly leave me anything.'

He kept his tone casual. This was not an interrogation . . . just some general conversation. Even if his heart was pounding.

‘There’s a lot of heirlooms. All have the crest of course. So no-one can claim them.’ He looked at Harry as though Harry wanted to steal his old crockery. ‘Most of them are too dangerous to touch. Unless you want your hands removed.’

Harry thought of the things in Grimmauld Place and couldn’t help agree.

‘At least they *do* something,’ Abraxas said. ‘The Malfoy family heirlooms – they’re just ornaments basically. Or the ones I’ve seen.’

Harry wondered what Draco Malfoy would think if he heard that and wished he could somehow rub it in his face.

It took him a second to catch onto what Alphard had said. *All have the crest, of course.*

It was true. The silver goblets Mundungus had stolen. All the objects in Sirius’ Drawing Room. The cutlery, the tables.

Harry could have sworn. He couldn’t entirely rule out the possibility, but the locket was probably not a Black family heirloom. How it had ended up in Bellatrix’s vault was not through her family. It wasn’t that easy.

It had to belong to the Lestranges.

Or someone else entirely.

Things never went smoothly for Harry. When the week finished without further incident, he knew it was too good to be true. After a week of dreamless sleep, a week of keeping away from Riddle, it all came back.

Seemingly the minute his eyes shut, he was back having Riddle’s dream.

This time he was in the Chamber. There was a pool of water around his feet and the bottom of his robes were floating in it. His shoes were soaked through. But he ignored this. On he went through it, wading in the swampy water, until he reached a clearing.

Ah. Just where he had thought.

There was a dog sitting there, perched on the sloped part of the ground to avoid the flooding. Of course the creature had wandered. It thought it could escape – didn't realise it was trapped under the school.

He went over, leaned down beside it. The dog wagged its tail hesitantly.

It looked like the Grim. Big and black and wild. Like Sirius. But this dog's fur was clean, and it was wearing a leather collar. He couldn't make out the words, the engravings on the name-tag were faint.

No matter.

He raised his wand, pointing it directly between the dog's eyes. The tail dropped. It sensed it, even before him and scampered backwards.

Harry tried to fight but he was helpless to stop. His wand was moving - his lips opening –

No, no, don't.

Those words, words he would never say–

No, please, no.

Green light and the dog fell dead.

It looked so much like Sirius that he jumped up, his heart pounding.

He could still feel his hand raise, even as he tried to push it down. Not shaky but steady, assured, no matter how much he resisted. He had been overcome with a need, a need like never before. He *needed* to kill that dog just as much as he did to breathe. He wanted it - longed for it.

If that was what it meant to use the Killing Curse . . .

Harry shivered. Wide awake, bile was beginning to rise in his throat.

What sort of person could do that . . .

And then his curtains were ripped open.

Harry grabbed his wand, a shield forming in seconds. It was Riddle, standing there, staring in. There was a strange smile playing on his lips. He looked triumphant.

‘What the hell?’ Harry said, half-asleep and beginning to splutter. ‘Go away!’

‘No. I don’t think I will.’

Harry lowered the shield and cast Lumos. Riddle looked even more smug in the light. Harry gave him a dirty look.

‘You can’t possibly be wearing robes at this time.’

He blinked. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Er - forget it.’

Harry’s heart had calmed down slightly. Riddle’s arrival had replaced all his shock with disgust.

‘You can’t just *do* that. Come here. Piss off and let me go to sleep.’

‘We both know you weren’t asleep,’ Riddle said. ‘You were invading my thoughts. Unless you’re going to deny that too?’

‘No.’

Harry got out of bed. He didn’t like the way Riddle was peering in, like he had just caught him in a trap and wanted to see how it would play out. Harry was fed up. With all the games, the tricks, the way Riddle thought he was some sort of interesting dancing mouse.

‘Well?’ Riddle said.

Harry ignored him for a moment, knowing he would hate it. ‘You were killing a dog,’ he said slowly. ‘*What the fuck?* ’

‘Oh, that.’

And then he seemed to relax. Smirked. ‘What can I say, it was an experiment.’

‘You used the Killing Curse. In school. Where *were* you anyway?’

‘The Chamber of Secrets. It's practically untraceable.’

Harry hadn’t expected him to tell the truth. But then, Riddle never imagined anyone else would find the Chamber or be able to enter it.

‘Is this a normal thing for you - killing animals?’

‘I prefer to think of it as *practicing magic.* Would students suit you better?’

Harry stared at him. ‘You’re really twisted.’

‘So you have said.’ He looked as though he had been given a great compliment. ‘If I wish to learn magic, I shall. Are you going to tell Dumbledore - say you say Tom cast a bad spell in a *dream*?’

‘A bad spell is a Petrificus Totalus. That’s murder.’

‘It was a dog, Harry. A stupid, old animal and it’s in the past. The real concerning matter is - why did you dream it?’

‘I don’t know!’ Harry snapped. ‘We’re connected or something – through the wands. I thought you were *researching* it.’

Riddle scowled. ‘My research has come to a dead end. Magic like this isn’t documented. Isn’t recorded. It doesn’t exist. Seers sometimes share dreams. Spells and potions can cause mind-links until they wear off. But wand-cores -’

He laughed. ‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘Maybe we’ve been cursed,’ Harry said. ‘Feels like it. Does anyone not like you?’

‘Well, there’s *you*. Which you like to make very clear. But as I informed you before, I don’t have enemies.’

‘And I said bullshit. Think harder. I don’t want your weird psychotic dreams or you having *mine.’*

He could still feel the Killing Curse – feel it not just in his wand but inside him, rotting away.

‘Afraid I’ll see your little ginger girlfriend?’

Harry's heart stopped. *'What?'*

Riddle hummed. 'Whatever happened there, I wonder? I sense so many feelings left behind. Was she killed by Grindelwald? Or just your common break-up? I suppose I'll have to *sleep on it. '*

'Whatever,' Harry said, snorting.

Sleep on it.

Riddle's lips twitched. 'I bet no-one knows how messed up you really are,' Harry said. 'Learning the Killing Curse. To cast that -'

'It takes the worst kind of person, doesn't it? That's what they say. But I think it's simpler than that. Much simpler. You don't have to be any sort of person – you just have to want it. So much it's a need.'

'I really don't care.'

'Have you ever felt that, Harry? Needed something so badly you couldn't think of anything else?'

'I've needed you to shut up a few times.'

'It's *wonderful.* The rush. The sheer power. You can't even comprehend it.' He stopped.

'Or can you?'

'Afraid not,' Harry said. 'I don't usually have unhealthy addictions. And I think we should tell a teacher about these dreams. Like you said, it's not normal.'

'Professor Dumbledore, right?' His face had darkened at the words, *unhealthy addictions.* 'And what's he going to do? Have a solution? Fix all your problems by waving his wand? Tell me, does he make *everything* you want come true?'

'You just don't want me to tell him about you practicing Unforgivables.'

Riddle raised his eyebrows. 'The entire Slytherin House knows that. It's not a big secret. Because here, I am in charge. The House follows me. And you will embrace it sooner or later. Everyone does.'

Harry wouldn't. Ever. Because he knew what Riddle was – knew better than any of them.

‘You know, you don’t scare me.’

‘Maybe,’ Riddle said. His voice was barely above a whisper but it made him shiver all the same. ‘But I should.’

The Truce

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry couldn't forget his encounter with Riddle. His curtains being ripped open, his heart leaping in his throat. The vividness of casting the Killing Curse and the cold, horrible feeling it brought. The link between them was very much real. It wasn't something he could ignore and put to the back of his mind. If Riddle dreamt about Ginny, anything was fair game.

The Weasleys. Cedric. Horcruxes. *Voldemort.*

Occlumency wasn't working. Wasn't Riddle's meant to be perfect? And yet Harry had experienced his dream like he was in it.

You have to need it.

He wouldn't leave his mind. His face was there constantly; eyes bright - black and bottomless - lips curled into a smirk. His voice, low and sinister; those words, over and over. Ringing in his ears, in his thoughts, in his very being. Riddle was a constant presence in his life and Harry couldn't escape it anymore. No matter how hard he tried.

At breakfast the next morning, he barely noticed the atmosphere around him. All the early mornings and the nights lying awake had left him in a zombie-like state. He nodded his head absently as Abraxas babbled, catching the words 'quidditch,' 'father' and 'Grindelwald' several times.

At the other side of the table, Belinda was in discussion with Walburga Black, a large girl with sharp features. She had a wide mouth, disproportionately so, and a long, narrow nose. Her eyes were colourless, small and watchful, and though a sixth-year, she looked older than any of them. Harry didn't like the way her gaze would shift, going from the conversation to the people nearby, her attention never solely on one thing.

Then there was Lucretia, talking to Adriana Bulstrode and Geneva Yaxley. The two girls were quiet—Harry only ever saw them in class—and practically inseparable. And right across from Harry, beside Abraxas, was Riddle.

He was talking to a younger student, a small boy who looked ready to wet himself, but Harry caught his eyes flitter over more than once.

‘Did you do Beery’s essay?’ Abraxas was saying. ‘I could only find four uses of Niffler’s Fancy.’

‘Wand-polish,’ Riddle said. Harry snapped around at his voice, instantly alert. ‘And in the past, cosmetic potions.’

‘Brilliant, thanks.’ Abraxas scrambled to find his school-bag, his elbows bumping off the table and his head disappearing from sight.

Harry hadn’t found five uses either—honestly, who had? —but he wasn’t about to start copying Riddle. He took a sip of his pumpkin juice, and felt Abraxas’ bag hit against his leg as he retrieved it.

Riddle had finished with the younger students. He turned to look at him, giving Harry his undivided attention. He could have sworn he looked pleased.

‘What?’ He said irritably.

‘Nothing.’ Riddle’s grin grew wider, covering his whole face. It wasn’t pleasant. Harry imagined it was the sort of smile he would make right after killing all his muggle family. ‘What are you expecting?’

‘To be questioned, maybe cursed. You making some cryptic remark anyway.’

Abraxas, pulling out his quills and ink, looked up in surprise.

‘Of course you were, Harry,’ Riddle said. ‘You always suspect the worst.’

He looked too smug. Harry tried to ignore the uneasy feeling he had. It was just Riddle being Riddle: sly, mysterious and wanting the upper hand. He was always making weird remarks around Harry; seemed to *enjoy* frustrating him.

Why was it any different this time?

Breakfast ended and they made their way to Transfiguration. Harry was thinking about talking to Dumbledore after class when Riddle came up beside him, his long strides making it effortless.

Somehow, they were alone. When had that happened? Harry could have sworn Abraxas was there a minute ago.

But now Abraxas was talking to Belinda, both their heads bent together in a strange merge of blonde. The others were far away.

‘What do you think of Professor Dumbledore?' Riddle asked.

'I like him,' Harry said immediately. 'He's always been there for me.'

Abraxas froze in horror but Riddle just hummed.

'Of course he has. What about me then, Harry? How far does your dislike go?'

'I hate you.'

Riddle looked positively delighted. 'Hatred. I do love strong emotions. And now—this connection between us. The dreams. What exactly is causing that?'

Harry's mouth opened before his brain had time to think. ‘I don't know,' he said. 'I thought I did, but I don't.'

Riddle's brows knitted together. 'You really don't know,' he said, more to himself than to Harry. 'That won't do. If you don't know the cause, then how can I get rid of it?"

Harry's eyes widened and it came to him then, suddenly, in perfect clarity. 'You poisoned me!'

The pumpkin juice. The all-knowing smile. His heart began to race.

'I warned you not to underestimate me. Veritaserum. Tasteless, so they say. Would you agree?'

'Yes. I mean - shut up! You can't just—it's forbidden in school. I'll tell.'

‘You'll tell?' Riddle repeated, sounding unimpressed and not at all worried. ‘This isn't the playground. Do you think anyone will believe you?'

'No. Maybe. My friends might. Professor Dumbledore would.' The answers came out on their own, before he could stop them.

'I think he should *prove* it. Now Weasley and Granger. What do they think of me?'

'They don't trust you. I think you scare them a bit.'

'Why?'

Harry clamped down on his lips so hard he tasted blood.

Fight it. It's like the Imperius. Fight it.

'They know what you've done. To Hagrid. I told them.'

It was the truth. That was a certainty. But his mouth was moving, more words were trying to come out. Harry angrily bit down on his lips once more.

'That's very convenient of you. And our little connection - you think it's the wands?'

'I don't know.'

Riddle watched him squirm for several seconds. 'Were your parents really killed by Grindelwald?' he said.

Harry resisted answering as long as he could. It was increasingly difficult. 'They were killed by a Dark Wizard. Not Grindelwald.'

You. They were killed by a version of you.

'Poor little orphan.' Riddle's voice was heavy with fake-sympathy. 'Don't you want revenge?'

'Yes.'

'How badly? Enough to kill?'

'Yes - *no* - I don't know.' He put his hands over his mouth and turned away. He was not giving into this. He would sooner cut out his own tongue.

As Harry moved away, Riddle's face darkened and he followed. 'How do you break the connection?' he said.

'I don't know!'

His blood was pounding in his ears and he could feel his teeth beginning to split his lips. He swore. If only he would somehow be unable to speak. Then an idea came to him - a wonderful, stupid idea.

'Silencio.' He pointed his wand at his face just as Riddle neared. There was a flash of light, momentarily blinding him. But when he opened

his mouth, moved his lips—blissful silence.

He looked back at Riddle. He didn't look annoyed, more amused—arrogant—and it made Harry clench his teeth.

He skipped Transfiguration entirely, hurrying away before Riddle decided to cast the counter-curse or follow after him. He fled corridor after corridor, only one thing on his mind.

How long would it be until the potion wore off?

Four hours. That was how long. Harry contemplated going to the Hospital Wing several times, but the chances of getting an antidote were unlikely. Veritaserum was rare. Riddle - the bastard - had probably brewed it himself. Or got it from one of his *friends*.

Harry sat down in one of the empty classrooms. Everything was quiet and still. He was so deep in the castle it was unlikely anyone would stumble past.

How had he been so stupid? Let his guard down? He knew what Snape would say. His voice, slick like oil and full of disgust, was crystal clear.

'*Foolish, Potter. Pathetic. The Dark Lord sees everything. Whatever you think you can do, he has already anticipated. No matter how hard you plan, he is a dozen steps ahead.*'

Riddle, with his soft voice. Silent and poisonous, smooth and deadly.

'I'm not scared of you.'

'You should be.'

Harry didn't think he had let anything slip. If the questions had gone on any longer, it would have been a disaster. But Riddle had wanted to know about the connection and the dreams, and there, Harry was just as uninformed as he was. For once it had proved useful.

The hours he sat there, his mind went over everything. The dreams. *Ridiculous*. Harry couldn't be sharing dreams with that psychopath. It wasn't possible. It wasn't fair.

Words rattling in his skull. *How badly? Enough to kill?*

The Silencio had worn off hours ago, and the potion had little power left. Anger had faded into a still, calculating calm.

Harry tried different sentences over and over again, letting them become more and more absurd as the Veritaserum weakened.

'I *could* kill him,' Harry said, testing out the words. They were heavy on his tongue. Wrong. 'If it meant saving everyone.'

He wasn't sure if it was the truth or a lie.

‘You ditched classes! We were so worried!’

‘Hermione skipped Charms to look for you. You should have seen it!’

‘You should have gone straight to Professor Dumbledore - your memory is evidence enough!’

‘It’s illegal, she’s right.’

Harry ignored Ron and Hermione. His head was beginning to hurt—a throbbing pain coming from everywhere at once. Their voices were too loud, too grating. Like an old tape recorder, spewing out the same words.

‘I was stupid,’ he said. ‘I should have known he would do something like that.’

‘Veritaserum is strictly restricted,’ Hermione replied. ‘You couldn't possibly have suspected - ‘

‘I should have.’

Harry turned away from her before he said something nasty. They were trying to help. He knew that. But his head was pounding, and words, biting words, were on the tip of his tongue.

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘But I’m going for a walk.’ He left, missing their expressions.

Harry ended up back in the Slytherin Common Room. It was quiet and almost empty. The weather was mild for autumn and the students had welcomed the outdoors with open arms. The lack of chatter couldn't be more pleasant and the green—it was a very soothing colour, wasn't it?

When Riddle walked in, Harry stood up from his chair and marched right over to him.

'Harry,' he said pleasantly. 'Feeling better, I hope? The professors were very worried.'

'I bet,' Harry said. 'You told them the truth then?'

'You ate something that disagreed with you. A stomach bug.'

'Yeah right.' Harry thought his anger was gone but right here - with Riddle - it all came back. 'I already told you I didn't know about the stupid dreams. Are you so paranoid you had to *prove* it?'

'You lie. I don't trust liars.'

Harry laughed—it was a loud, maniac sound and Riddle's eyes widened. 'I was telling the truth.'

Riddle nodded, slowly. 'Come on, now. Let's switch positions. You're me. And someone hates you. They've been secretive since day one. Hiding things endlessly. Then you start sharing dreams. Wouldn't you want to have proof?'

Harry hesitated. 'I am nothing like you.'

'You wouldn't do the same? If our roles were reversed? If you could get truth potion oh so *easily?'*

'Yes,' Harry snapped. 'I'd force it down your bloody throat if I had to. But that's where the similarities end. You're so smug. You framed Hagrid and you don't even care. You think everyone should worship you and that you have everything figured out. But you don't know what's going on either. So really, Riddle—is it all a big lie?'

Riddle froze and with him, Harry's heart stopped. He could almost feel

the air strum. Feel Riddle's mind shifting, thinking; a calculator in action.

'Maybe we're not so different at all,' Riddle murmured. 'Unique from the rest. You, stubborn and temperamental. Quick-witted and sharp. We're two orphans. Connected by wand-cores and by dreams. By something *unknown*.'

Harry opened his mouth. Nothing came out. It was too much like the Chamber of Secrets in second year. The same speech. But Harry wasn't thinking of the Basilisk and the diary. Nothing except Riddle's words.

'Can you feel it? The connection?'

Harry swallowed. 'No.'

'Are you lying?'

'I'm not the one who lies. You fool everyone with your nice guy act. And that's what it is—an act.'

Harry wasn't sure Riddle was even listening. He was just staring at him, a strange look on his face. Like he was fascinated.

'You still aren't afraid,' he said. 'Only a fool would speak to me that way.'

'Then call me a fool. You're no Grindelwald. You're just a psychopath with some power. You have them all tricked. And I'm the only one who can see it.'

'I do have them tricked. Maybe you as well. But Harry, this *act* - do you really want to see what's beneath?'

An empty void. Black and infinite. Rippling sheets of velvet, dark, so dark everything disappeared. He could see it now, imagine it in his head and when he looked into Riddle's shiny, endless eyes. Something just below the surface, waiting to emerge.

Did Harry even know? How could he be so *sure* what lurked in that mind?

Time stretched between them and Riddle waited, watching him. The question hung in the air, lingering far too long.

Harry shook himself. 'Whatever,' he said and walked away.

He thought Riddle would have been angrier. Someone could see into his dreams—into some of the most private parts of his mind. This was Tom Riddle for god's sake. But if he was angry, it was carefully hidden. Hidden with all his other emotions.

Harry desperately wondered if they existed at all. He could be angry, he knew. Angry and amused and cruel. Was he scared? Of their connection? Of what Harry might see? Or did he simply not care?

The next morning, Riddle—looking wide-awake and put-together—greeted him outside the Common Room. 'I didn't sleep,' he said. 'And I know you didn't either. I heard you get up.'

'Stalker,' Harry muttered.

'Pardon?'

'Walker. I was going for an—er—walk.'

Riddle's eyebrows raised. 'I'm sure you're much inclined to thunder and lightning.'

'Love it,' Harry agreed. 'It's so—loud.'

Riddle laughed, his face changing for an instant. Then it was gone and he said, with the same calmness he did everything else, 'I dreamed of a man falling behind a curtain.'

Harry stopped walking and gaped. 'That's my - 'He almost couldn't say it. 'My godfather.'

'Your life seemed to be one big tragedy,' Riddle said, shaking his head. 'Really, how *are* you coping?'

Harry ignored the question. 'Well, all you dream about is a bloody *Basilisk* and the Chamber.'

'The Basilisk? You saw her?'

'Yeah.' He shuddered. 'With big, yellow eyes. You're not meant to look in their eyes.'

‘The perks of being the heir of Slytherin,’ Riddle said. ‘I control her.’

‘Right,’ Harry said wearily. ‘That wouldn’t have anything to do with Hagrid being expelled, would it?’

Riddle only smiled. ‘I apologise for the Truth Potion,’ he said. ‘It made you angry and distrustful.’

‘You’re not sorry, though?’ Harry said. He was curious despite himself. Fascinated by the many layers of Riddle.

‘No. Remorse—it’s pointless, isn’t it?’

‘It makes you human.’

‘Oh, Harry.’ He laughed. ‘There are more important things.’

Harry wondered when Riddle was going to curse him again. Try and weasel out more information. But he did not. They went down to breakfast and he acted almost pleasant. Outside the Hall, he stopped walking so suddenly Harry bumped into him.

‘Your wand. May I see it?’

Harry laughed incredulously. ‘Of course. How about you *keep* it?’

‘Take it out.’ Riddle seemed to fight his own smirk. ‘The connection - let’s test it.’

Hesitantly, he did so. Riddle took out his wand as well, whispered a spell and a thin trail of gold joined the wands together. Harry’s hand shook as the gold seemed to creep up his arm. It felt warm. *Nice*.

Riddle was staring at the golden chain. He reached out one hand—the Gaunt ring gleamed in his finger—and touched it.

A jolt like electricity went through Harry. The line broke and the wands forcefully tore apart. The warmth went so suddenly he felt strange. Empty and cold.

‘That was interesting,’ Riddle said. ‘Did you feel that?’ He continued before Harry answered. ‘Nevermind. I think your wand dislikes me.’

‘Like wand, like owner.’ Reluctantly he laughed. ‘Isn’t that what they say?’

‘No-one says that.’

‘They *should*.’

‘To break the connection,’ Riddle mused. ‘What if you snapped your wand?’

Harry froze, his smile slipping away. ‘Let’s go back a bit— *snap my wand?’*

‘If we’re saying the wands are causing it—which is unlikely—that would break the link.’

‘Snap your own,’ Harry said coldly. ‘You’re not touching mine.’ He stuffed it back in his pocket and glared at Riddle who didn’t back down.

‘It was just a thought, Harry. No need to be so defensive.’

‘Don’t think it then. I swear, if you even go near my wand— ‘

‘I won’t.’

‘—you’ll regret it. I mean it.’

Riddle raised his eyebrows. ‘Ok,’ he agreed. ‘I won’t. Now—breakfast?’

With one final glare, Harry followed Riddle into the Hall.

It wasn’t right. It wasn’t normal. Riddle shouldn’t talk to him, shouldn’t spend so much of his time pestering him. He was like a clam - an annoying, persistent clam stuck to a rock. How was Harry meant to think of what to do? Keep a clear head? Maybe that’s what Riddle wanted: Harry distracted.

They had double Defence that morning. He rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn. The rest of the table were in high spirits about the upcoming Quidditch Match. The only people not engaging in the conversation were Belinda, who was reading a letter on her lap, Harry and Riddle.

Harry looked over at the Gryffindors - Hermione and Ron were talking to Ron’s granddad, Septimus. Their faces were bright and happy. Hermione was waving her hands as she explained something and Ron was having a coughing fit from laughing. Something inside him

relaxed.

'Defence, Harry,' Abraxas said, nudging him. 'C'mon.'

Harry took one look back at his friends and followed. The desks and chairs were cleared out of the room. Professor Merrythought stood on a raised platform. 'We're going to be practicing duelling today,' she said, gesturing them all in. Her voice echoed in the emptiness.

Harry perked up at the thought of a practical lesson. They had been studying troll settlement patterns for the last week.

'Will you be my partner?' Abraxas said, already taking his wand out. Harry nodded. He was curious about wherever his friend was as good at duelling as he was with every other aspect of magic.

'Actually -'

And there was another voice, dark and smooth, and managing to distract Harry entirely. Bringing everything—the room and the students, the buzzing chatter, his racing heart—to only *him*. 'Would you duel with me, Harry?'

Riddle's eyebrows were raised in a challenge. Harry thought about saying no, thought about laughing and shaking his head. What was he —mad?

Maybe. Because Riddle wasn't Voldemort but he was just as bad. Different but dangerous. Unpredictable.

'Ok.'

Abraxas' excitement had melted into surprise. He glanced at Harry and then Riddle. 'That's fine. Just don't kill each other.' He gave Harry a suspicious look and then moved to find another partner.

Harry waited until he was out of earshot. 'Whatever you're planning,' he said, 'Merrythought's going to be watching.'

'Why am I always planning something?' Riddle said. But his eyes were gleaming, too much for there to be no ulterior motive. 'I'll tell you exactly my plan if you like.'

Harry shrugged. 'Go on.'

'You're correct in the fact I can't cast Dark Magic. *Much.'*

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘No, please do. You’ll be easier to deal with expelled.’

‘Now, where would be the fun in that? I want to test a theory. It’s said that brother wands can’t harm each other. What about seeing how that goes with a nice, friendly duel?’

‘I didn’t think you did nice or friendly,’ Harry said. Then he grinned, because that was not Riddle’s plan at all. One of them, perhaps, but not the main one. ‘Or maybe you just want to see if you can beat me.’

He was pushing a line and they both knew it. Just how far until Riddle *snapped?*

‘We’ll see.’ He couldn’t quite school his annoyance. Harry saw it in the little line between his eyebrows, the muscle standing visible in his jaw. The prickle in his voice. He stared, unable to look away. Riddle with his mask slipping. His act disappearing just like he had threatened.

Harry raised his eyebrows—this time he was challenging him. *And he was an idiot*, Hermione would say. *A great big foolish idiot.*

He was thinking of Veritaserum and the Chamber, which he saw every night in his dreams. Always there, no matter how much he tried to avoid it. Riddle saying he would *snap his wand,* with his face the picture of innocence.

‘Ok, everyone, friendly spells,’ Professor Merrythought said.

Harry stared meaningfully. ‘Hear that?’

‘Perfectly.’

Her voice was right beside them but Harry didn’t look around. ‘Obviously this is a duel. You can’t simply stick to first-year spells. But if I see anything that could cause physical harm, trust me, the consequences will be severe.’

Harry knew they would, they all did.

Did Riddle? What did he care about consequences, releasing a Basilisk in a school? Harry didn’t know him half as well as he had thought. He was different to everything he had anticipated.

They got into position.

‘Alright, Harry,’ Riddle said. Despite the challenge, he looked almost excited. Bright and eager, his pretty face all curled up in anticipation.

‘I would say good luck,’ Harry said. ‘But that would be a lie.’

Riddle grinned, all his white teeth exposed. ‘Now let’s bow.’

Harry didn’t want to. It brought him back to the graveyard and to Voldemort surrounded by Death Eaters, Cedric dead only a few feet away. To every spell being life or death, every second potentially his last.

But they were in a classroom. And right then, Riddle didn’t remind him of Voldemort at all.

‘Nice and friendly,’ Professor Merrythought said again. ‘No one is going to miss their classes by going to the Hospital Wing.’

Her voice faded away and Harry gripped his wand. Now he only wanted to *beat* him. More than he did anything else. They bowed, Riddle low and slow, almost mockingly; Harry short and abrupt.

And then Riddle fired the first spell and they were off.

Harry certainly wouldn’t win any duelling competitions. He had no finesse and flashy wand-movements, but bursts of raw power and lightning-fast reflexes. Like everything else he did, it was instincts, everything or nothing. He fought to survive.

But Riddle—

He was all graceful movement and hands; a performance, a beautiful act on a stage. Perfectly trained, like a master at his craft. Harry had talent. Riddle had *skill*.

He had never appreciated it before, not with Voldemort. But Riddle—seventeen and psychotic—was as good as any Order member. Not one of his spells were spoken aloud, and yet were still so fast, so perfectly aimed . . .

Harry fired an Expelliarmus, then another. Riddle could have been doing anything—his spells flashed in a light-show, too fast to decipher.

Harry was pouring out all his anger and frustration. *Veritaserum-Hagrid-Voldemort-Riddle* - what was the difference really? He couldn’t

even think, couldn't see. Everything was light, bright and dizzying.

It was Riddle, it was Voldemort, it was someone whose dreams he shared, whose smile was dangerously charming. Mocking laughter, high and cold, and dark rick laughter, merging together like haunting music—

The light hit.

Harry's vision exploded, his thoughts wrenched away. For a moment, it felt like the Killing Curse. But when he looked again, really looked, his eyebrows were growing horrifyingly long, out from his face, around his eyes, blinding him. Harmless.

He cast a Protego and reversed the spell. Riddle was grinning.

'Bombarda,' Harry fired.

He side-stepped it. Cast something else.

Harry ducked but it was too late. His mouth was glued shut. He thought for a split-second but Riddle fired again—once, twice, three times.

It should have been the end. Harry was rubbish at non-verbal spells but one always worked. One he had practiced until he could do it in his sleep. *Expelliarmus.*

The two beams of light struck. Electricity cracked through the air, and a thick chain, solid and shimmering, joined their wands together. It seemed to join Harry and *Riddle* together.

Because he could feel it suddenly — alarmed surprise that wasn't his own. His thoughts . . . Faster than his own mind worked.

Magnificent. But what's causing it? Is it safe to break? Like nothing I've ever read before . . .

His cheek stinging from a hex Harry had hit Riddle with. Curiosity and surprise; a mixture of wonder, awe, *want*—

Harry Potter, what are *you?*

And his mind was flooding, the light was too bright to look at. He was Harry and he was Riddle and he was feeling everything at once.

He tugged his wand and tried to break the link. For a moment it

resisted, and heat seared up his arm, burning him. Then there was a bang. The chain broke and golden sparks flew in every direction.

Everything stopped. Everyone gaped. Harry started at Riddle and Riddle was staring back, his cheeks flushed, his eyes very wide. His mouth was half-open, but he didn't seem to notice. Didn't care.

Everything came back slowly.

'What on earth was that?' Professor Merrythought said.

Harry tore his eyes away from Riddle. He felt dazed. 'An Illusion Charm. I overpowered it, sorry.'

She frowned, slightly. 'It's made a right mess of my room.'

Harry looked around. The sparks had gone straight through the wood like bullet holes. The floor gleamed, sticky with trails of glitter. Sparkling like ground up diamonds.

'You two can clean that up,' Professor Merrythought tutted. 'A duel shouldn't destroy a classroom, however impressive it may be.'

'Right.' Harry glanced down at the floor again. 'Evanesco. Scourgify.'

Nothing happened.

'It could be a good old-fashioned soap and water job,' she said. 'And you'll have to repair my floor.'

'Of course we will,' Riddle said. The look of wonder had disappeared from his face. He was back to his composed self. 'We got ahead of ourselves.'

She softened slightly, like all the professors did at his earnest voice. Then she turned back to the class. 'Great work today, everyone. You can head out to lunch early.'

There were a few grinning faces, everyone trooping out the doors. Harry and Riddle stayed behind. Harry kept his eyes firmly on the floor.

'Tidy that up then you can head on,' Professor Merrythought said. 'And boys — that was some of the fastest spellwork I've ever seen. Well done.'

Harry wondered had she seen their wands connect. How long had it

held for? Seconds? Minutes? As the classroom door closed, his eyes shot back to Riddle. He had nothing to say. He opened his mouth—his tongue seemed to have dried up.

'Fascinating,' Riddle said. 'I had your thoughts. Your feelings.'

Harry couldn't answer.

'*Everything*.'

He looked at Riddle, with the cut down his cheek. His wild eyes, downright dangerous. The way he stared at him, as though he cared for nothing else.

'I did as well,' Harry said. His voice didn't sound right. 'How's that even possible . . . '

But it was and it had happened and it was almost worse than Voldemort had ever been.

'What if it gets worse?' Harry blurted out. 'What if it doesn't stop? *Can't* stop?'

Riddle didn't answer for a second. Harry wondered on this for a second and knew it immediately. 'One of us will die,' he said. 'To end it.'

Riddle blinked. 'Precisely. But that risk— 'he shook his head. 'We're connected, Harry. Hurting you could have consequences for me.'

Harry disagreed but he kept his mouth shut. It was better than Riddle coming up with something else and deciding to dig around in his mind for answers.

'I know you hate me,' Riddle continued. He waved his wand and the stains rose from the floor, hovering in the air, a shimmering golden curtain. 'Justified, perhaps. And I still think you're too secretive. But getting rid of this should be our main priority. I'll let you keep your little secrets.'

He flicked his wand and it vanished. 'So what about putting it in the past for now. A truce.'

Harry froze. Riddle was the devil. Wasn't he? How could Harry even *believe* this? Believe anything he said?

'Let's work together and try to get rid of our connection. It's an

inconvenience. Before it—as you bluntly put it—gets worse.'

'I don't trust you,' Harry said. 'At all.'

Riddle's face didn't change. 'I know you don't. It doesn't matter.'

They had to get rid of this link. Whatever it was, Harry couldn't be connected with him anymore. With a *monster*. It was too much. All the dreams, all the hiding. He felt like he was losing his mind. He could never fully relax around Riddle and he knew it.

But —

He was there, he was always there. Every minute of every day, Harry was trying to fight it. Resist and resist but it was always Riddle, if not physically then in his mind, in his thoughts—

'Ok,' Harry said, a strange feeling in his stomach. He was sinking and floating at once. He shut everything out. 'A truce. No more sneaking around and trying to kill each other.'

He met his eye. *Breathed*. 'Let's work together.'

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Feel free to tell me your thoughts :)

The First Quidditch Match

Whatever Harry had expected from the ‘truce’ was not this. He had imagined he could ignore Riddle now, as they were no longer fighting. Thought that Riddle would grow tired of annoying him. There was no fun in baiting someone who didn’t react, surely?

But Riddle was as annoying as ever. He was always there, smirking in the Common Room, or gazing over in class. Talking to him. And now Harry had to keep his retorts to himself. They were friendly these days and it was unnerving.

Unnerving but so much *easier*. An imaginary weight had disappeared from his shoulders. Harry could stop fighting, stop resisting, at least for now. It took so much energy to constantly avoid Riddle and be on guard. Always preparing for an attack, ready for a fight.

No, the neutrality—the truce—gave him room to breathe. He would get rid of the connection and then they would get back to their own time. All this would be one strange, distant memory.

Hermione and Ron did not agree.

'You're being silly,' Hermione said. There were heavy bags under her eyes, which were fighting to stay open. She has probably been up all night studying. 'I get it, I do. You want a break. And you think this is going to work. But you’ll let your guard down. Which is what Riddle *wants*. He wants you unsuspecting, it’s what he does to everyone.’

Ron was nodding solemnly in agreement.

'I'm not actually friends with him,' Harry felt the need to point out. 'Riddle thinks we have an agreement and he will be the one caught off-guard. Not me.'

Hermione raised her eyebrows.

'You do have an agreement, though,' Ron said. 'What Hermione means, mate, is don't trust him.'

'I won't,' Harry snapped. How stupid did they think he was? 'I know better than both of you what he's like. And isn't that what you said,

Hermione? Be nice to him?'

'Yes, but I didn't mean actually work with him. What if he figures something out?'

'That's why I'm doing this,' Harry said. 'So he won't.'

They didn't understand. It was convenient, nothing more. And Hermione told him to stop antagonising Riddle—why didn't she get it? They didn't have to put up with him constantly. Didn't have his dreams when they closed their eyes. Didn't see him smirking or laughing and invading their space; didn't have him wake them up in the middle of the night, waiting.

Harry wasn't going to start killing muggleborns and practicing Dark Magic. He wasn't going to forget who he was.

'Spending that much time with him,' Hermione said hesitantly. 'Something might slip out.'

'No, it won't,' Harry said. 'What am I going to say - oi, Riddle, did you know I'm from the future? Yeah, it's a funny story. Wanna hear?'

Ron snorted. 'It's dangerous pretending to be his friend,' he said. 'You might just snap and start cursing him. I would.'

'I won't,' Harry said. 'He's not Voldemort, I know that. And this way I can watch him. It's easier.'

'I suppose it is better than fighting him,' Hermione said, chewing her lip. 'And avoiding isn't an option anymore.'

'Exactly,' Harry said. 'He's having my dreams, Hermione. I can't ignore it.'

They were connected, Harry and Riddle.

'We just want to make it stop. And then I can go back to pretending he doesn't exist.'

Hermione looked like she wanted to speak but held her tongue.

'Just don't mess up,' Ron said. 'Because this whole friendship act could go badly.'

Harry knew it could. Knew he could lose his temper and forget. Reveal something by accident. It could go badly in a thousand different ways.

'Don't worry,' he said, pushing them from his mind. 'I won't let it.'

Hermione, especially, was annoyed at him. She didn't like how much time he spent around the Slytherins, as though all their bad traits would rub off. As if Harry was going to become a Death-Eater and start calling Riddle ‘his lord.’

He wanted his link to Riddle gone. So what if it meant working with the enemy? It was only a small price to pay. For Harry to pay.

He was rubbing his scar, barely noticing the ache going through it. It was a dull, insistent pain he had all day. Along with his bad mood, Harry would have enjoyed nothing better than to pick a fight with Ron and Hermione —see did they want to try being in Slytherin for a day. It wouldn’t be so easy then.

They’re just worried.

He scratched at his scar and imagined ripping it out.

They didn’t understand.

No-one was doing anything, not figuring out how to get home or fix the time-turner. None of this made sense.

'What's wrong with your head?'

Harry looked up, dropping his hand like he had been caught stealing. It was Abraxas.

'Nothing. Migraine.'

'Will you be fine for the Match? We’re preparing now but you could go to the Hospital Wing.'

The match. Harry had forgotten. 'I'll be fine,' he said. 'It's getting better already.'

The pain was nothing to how it was in fifth-year. When Voldemort was angry, Harry's head seemed to explode, like a crucio aimed right at his scar.

'Ok,' Abraxas said, not half-convinced. 'And remember Harry, we're playing to win.'

Quidditch. The thought of it made everything a tiny bit better. He was going to play a match against Ravenclaw. He was Seeker. That's all mattered right now.

They left the Common Room and went down to the Pitch, where the team were assembled.

'Today's your lucky day,' Alphard said, crossing the grass to meet them. He was the only one already in uniform.

'And why's that?' Harry said.

'You're borrowing Orion's broom.'

'Orion? Your cousin?'

Sirius' father?

'Well, you can't have mine or Abraxas'. We're playing.' He tilted his head. 'You could use a school one, if you would prefer.'

'No,' Harry said. He cleared his throat. 'That would be—that would be great.'

Alphard looked at him oddly and Harry stared down at the grass and his scuffed trainers. He hadn't expected kindness of any kind from the Slytherins, especially Alphard.

'Well, you're a good player.' His voice was gruff. 'You deserve it.'

Orion's brook was in perfect condition. There was not a bristle out of place and the wood was coated in fresh polish. Harry was almost afraid to use it. He could be rough with the Firebolt because it was his. This belonged to someone else.

When they finished getting changed, Abraxas began to pace up and

down.

‘There’s the Ravenclaws.’ He pointed to a bunch of students, blurry in the sunlight. ‘Oh, *Merlin.’*

‘I’ll try my best to get the snitch,’ Harry said. ‘I promise.’

Abraxas gave a brisk nod. His face was green and his lips clamped shut. Harry didn’t fully understand it, but Abraxas needed them to win.

The match started and the stands roared in excitement. Harry avoided looking up at them. He felt like he was betraying Ron and Hermione and knew he wouldn’t be able to resist picking them out of the crowd.

He focused on the broom in his hand, familiar even though it wasn’t his own.

The Captains shook hands. Another whistle blew. They shot into the air and were off.

The wonderful thing about Quidditch was that nothing changed. Blurs of blue and green streaked through the air and his ears roared with the wind. The rush—that wonderful rush—filled him.

‘Ravenclaw Adrian Darcy with the ball! Oh, intercepted by Matthew Spinnet. That’s nice play.’

He flew above the other players, watching as the Quaffles and Bludgers launched around.

‘Harry Potter replaces Lawrence Fawley as Slytherin Seeker. Was that a wise move? We have to wonder why the captain would choose another Seventh-Year to play.’

The commentator’s voice faded. Everything faded. He was squinting in the dazzling sunlight, with the air harsh on his cheeks, the wind roaring in his ears.

‘And Ravenclaw scores!’

It was Quidditch—it was a Quidditch match—and god he had missed it.

The game carried on and the Ravenclaw score rose. The Slytherin play grew more desperate. Several times, the whistle was blown. Bludgers were hurling everywhere and Alphard—a tiny streak of green—was single handedly holding the team together.

Come on, Harry. Come on.

He had used most of the tricks on the other Seeker. The fake dives and distractions. Now, the boy regarded him with mistrustful eyes, tailing all his movements. But when Harry spotted the snitch by the Ravenclaw goalposts, his careful plans disappeared. He glanced back at the Seeker—the other boy hadn't noticed—and shot upwards. A second later, the other seeker followed. Perfect.

And then Harry gripped Orion's broom, hoped it wouldn't get smashed, and dived straight back down.

The Ravenclaw Seeker expected careful, cheating Slytherin but he was getting reckless Gryffindor. He was getting what had made Harry the youngest seeker in a century, with his sheer nerve. All his fears were gone, nothing was on his mind except getting that snitch.

A Bludger came out of nowhere. The light was so blinding Harry nearly knocked a Ravenclaw Chaser from her broom in his attempt to avoid it. He dove through the Slytherins, felt the other Seeker right behind.

The grass was getting nearer and nearer. He could see every individual blade. The snitch was fluttering metres away, at the bottom of the middle hoop. Down, down, down he went, until it was an inch away, a fraction.

The ground was so close he could almost feel it—he was a second from smashing the broom into a thousand pieces; the goal-post colliding with his head . . .

At the last second, he tilted the broom upwards. The bristles skimmed the grass, there was a smashing sound behind him. The snitch had spotted the two Seekers and it flew out of the way.

Up, up —

Straight into his waiting hand.

Harry's ears were banging, the crowd was like white noise. The snitch wiggled feebly in his hand and he raised it in the air, causing the stands to explode with sound.

He flew to the ground and carefully got off the broom. The giddy, weightless feeling disappeared when he saw the other Seeker. He was clutching his nose, blood pouring between his fingers. Harry ran over before the Ravenclaws reached him.

'Oh, god,' he breathed. 'Oh fuck.'

The boy stood up, wobbling. 'I slowed down,' he said. 'Before I hit the ground and *died*. You—you're mad.'

He shook his head in disbelief and Harry smiled weakly. 'So you're ok?'

The boy nodded. 'I don't have a death-wish. He stuck out his hand. 'Good game.'

Harry shook it. 'You too.'

Then the Slytherins were swarming over and Abraxas whopped in delight. 'Brilliant! Brilliant, you reckless bastard -'

Harry laughed. 'I promised you I'd get the snitch, didn't I?'

'Yeah. Yeah, you did.'

They were all congratulating him, all beaming, and Harry forgot that he didn't belong here. Forgot everything bad about Slytherin House and how he could never, truly, be friends with these people.

It didn't matter right then. They were a team, all full of exhilaration and pride, drunk on euphoria, dizzy with it. Nothing mattered.

'Party in the Common Room,' Abraxas called, to a booming cheer. 'Come on, let's shower.'

'Congratulations,' Riddle said.

The Common Room was quieting down, almost back to normal. Harry sat in one of the armchairs and Riddle stood beside him, blocking out the firelight. 'I wasn't sure you could actually play Quidditch.'

Harry looked up. 'Oh, thanks a lot.'

'Well, you know,' Riddle said, sitting down in the opposite armchair. 'It could have been a ruse. But you can play—really play.'

Harry didn't know what to say. It was too awkward. He stared at Riddle, frowning.

'I'm not plotting murder right now,' Riddle said, a smile beginning on his lips.

'*What?*' Harry scrambled backwards in his chair.

'Your expression. You look like you can't decide what to think. So I said it. I'm not plotting murder.'

Harry made a disbelieving noise. 'What about torture then? Are you planning that?'

'Not today anyway.'

Harry coughed to cover his grin. How absurd. 'And you wonder why I hate you,' he said.

Riddle was leaning back in his chair. 'We have a truce, do we not? No more hatred.'

'Sorry,' Harry said. 'I'll just obliviate it all from my mind.'

'Well, if you insist.'

'No!'

But Riddle was smiling. *Joking.* 'I'm not going to obliviate you.'

'I know,' Harry said. 'Well, I think I do. You wouldn't risk it in case you obliviated yourself as well. The connection and all that.'

'It would also be no fun if you didn't remember me.'

‘What?’

‘There would be no suspicion. You wouldn’t think I’m plotting murder at every moment — ‘

Harry laughed nervously. ‘Right. It would all be good until I go to bed and dream about your Chamber of Secrets and Basilisk. The pretence would disappear then.’

‘Exactly, Harry. See? It’s inevitable. We’re working together now.’

And you would kill your best friend if it was convenient.

‘How’s that going?’ Harry said. ‘The wands. Did you find anything?’

‘Connections like that don’t exist,’ was Riddle’s response. No then.

‘They do now,’ Harry said. ‘Unless you’re a figment of my imagination.’

Riddle raised his eyebrows. ‘You wouldn’t be able to dream up me.’

‘Of course not.’ Harry saw the surprise flash over his face. ‘You’re much too evil.’

Riddle laughed and it was as strange as ever. It made Harry remember that he was still a human, as weird as it was.

‘Of course, Harry. Out of all the possible reasons, that’s the one you chose. I expected it, however far-fetched.’

‘Far-fetched, my arse,’ Harry scoffed.

Riddle grinned. ‘I must leave you.’ He stood up, lingering for a second. ‘And Harry?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Watch Abraxas. Someone gave the poor boy *firewhiskey.’*

The way Riddle said the word made Harry laugh. He sounded equally disgusted and disapproving. Harry looked over to where Abraxas was sitting on the floor, cross-legged, and rolling a cork back and forth. ‘I think he’s fine.’

But when he looked back, Riddle was gone.

Things improved between Harry, Ron and Hermione. There was still tension: Hermione's disapproval was starkly visible even when she wasn't saying it. But for now, they ignored it. No talk of Riddle, no talk of the Slytherins.

They were in potions class that Monday and Hermione was stressed. 'Professor Slughorn won't be impressed with my essay,' She whispered. 'It's only the recommended two feet. And I was so busy researching I didn't even proof-read!'

Ron patted her on the back. 'There, there. You may get an E instead of an O. It's no big deal.'

She looked up sharply. 'That's not funny, Ron.'

Harry and Ron shared a look and Harry had to feign a coughing fit to hide his laughter.

'And you -' She said, rounding on him, not at all fooled. 'Why do you not even *try* in this class?'

'Well, it's pointless,' Harry said. 'None of this matters when we go back, does it? And I'm shit at Potions. You know that.'

'Shit without your little cheat book,' Ron agreed. His voice quietened. 'Oh, there's Sluggy. I wonder what we're making today.'

Slughorn strode into the classroom. 'I assume a lot of people didn't complete their homework because of the match?' There was a twinkle in his eyes and the class gave a chorus of agreement.

Harry nudged Hermione. Her lips parted in surprise.

'Don't worry, I will be collecting it on Friday. Give everyone a few days to . . . clear their heads.' He gave an exaggerated wink.

'There, there,' Harry said, patting Hermione on the back. 'You have

plenty of time to proof-read now.'

Ron couldn't suppress his laughter and Hermione's face flushed. 'You two aren't funny!' she hissed.

Slughorn turned around at the noise. He didn't tell them to be quiet. It was much worse. 'Harry, my boy!'

Harry tried to slink down in his seat.

'That was excellent flying, truly excellence! You're the talk of the staff room, I must say. And the school---isn't that right?'

Harry didn't say anything but Slughorn laughed at his own joke. 'I've never been prouder. Keep it up and we'll have the Cup this year for sure.' A wistful expression crossed his face. 'And stay behind after class. There's a little club I want to tell you about. We would be happy to have you.'

The Slug Club. Harry thought he would escape it this time. He could feel Ron and Hermione's eyes on him, both of them suppressing amusement.

'Er - '

Slughorn was staring at him expectantly.

'Sure. I'd love to.'

He beamed. 'Excellent! And Slytherins – we're having a career choice meeting in the Common Room tonight. The place better be tidy. I'll be there at seven and strongly advise you all are too.'

Harry wondered how it would go down if he said he wanted to be an Auror. He could imagine the horrified faces and was tempted.

I want to grow up and fight Dark Wizards. What do you think?

But he was meant to have Quidditch ambitions, dreams of playing professionally. Ambition.

'Now, we're brewing the Elixir to Induce Euphoria. Most of you will have done that last year. If we want it complete on time, you need to work in pairs. So –'

He made a show of glancing around the room. ‘Mr. Malfoy, would you work with Mr. Weasley? And Miss Granger - what about Mr. Corner?’

Ron froze for one whole moment and the look he gave Joseph Corner was deadly. Slughorn was pairing up others. The Slytherins were mostly placed with their friends. Some people didn’t move at all.

‘Mr. Potter, would you move beside Tom? You can tell him all about that Quidditch match, I’m sure.’

Harry could have groaned. Slughorn thought he was doing him a favour. Pairing him up with the great Tom.

Ron and Hermione had stopped glaring at each other from across the room. He could feel their eyes the whole time he gathered his books and sat down.

‘Should be simple enough,’ Riddle said, looking up and shoving the recipe aside. ‘Even *you* might manage this one.’

‘Practiced your duelling yet?’ Harry said.

It didn’t have the response he had hoped. Riddle only laughed. ‘Maybe. Want to see and find out?’

‘I think I’ll pass. Too many potions to study.’ He put his cauldron on the ground. Riddle’s was in better condition, without the wobbly base and suspicious stains.

‘You’ve been invited to the Slug Club,’ Riddle said. ‘That’s what Professor Slughorn meant when he said stay behind. It’s a club he has for students he believes will do well. Mostly Slytherins. There’s a party on Friday.’

‘Lucky me,’ Harry muttered, thinking back to sixth year. ‘Do I have to go?’

‘Usually no. But as a Slytherin, yes.’

Harry tried to find the bright side. Maybe at the Slug Club, Riddle would let a few of his plans slip. He knew he had worked in Borgin and Burkes for a while after graduating . . .

‘Do you get headaches?’ Harry said abruptly.

Riddle, who was staring off into the distance, frowned. ‘Headaches? No.’ Then his eyes sparked with recognition. ‘You mean through the connection. I saw you grab your head that day on the way to Herbology.’

‘How do you even remember that?’ Harry said. ‘It doesn’t matter. It’s nothing.’

‘I don’t want to start getting headaches,’ Riddle said, lowering his voice. ‘So, it is important.’

‘Wow,’ Harry said. ‘What a great show of sympathy.’

‘Would you prefer me to pretend?’ All at once, Riddle’s voice rose, from low and smooth to high and pitiful. ‘Your poor head! It must be *awful*! Whatever will you do, darling?’ He grabbed Harry’s arm. ‘Do you need the Hospital Wing? I could brew you potions, if you prefer. Maybe St. Mungo’s, just to be sure -’

‘Stop that,’ Harry snapped, jumping away. ‘I get it. Message received.’

All at once, the desk was too small. The tiny amount of space between them, elbows almost touching.

Riddle’s face went back to normal. ‘I thought you knew me, Harry? Aren’t I evil? All an act?’

‘You are,’ Harry agreed.

‘Then why ‘—his voice was a murmur, so soft no one else could hear —'should I *pretend*?’

‘You shouldn’t.’ Harry had witnessed enough of Riddle’s lies. ‘You can be as twisted as you want.’

A beat of silence; Riddle seemed to contemplate.

‘I might have to find a spell to deafen myself though. So be warned.’

‘There are curses.’ His face relaxed, the glint in his eyes returned. ‘The lovely Brain-Bleeder will rip your eardrums out.’

‘It doesn’t sound very lovely.’

They began the potion. Harry mostly watched. Every-time he went to do something, Riddle’s jaw would clench and his hands would itch, as he resisted taking over. It suited Harry fine. He was happy to sit there and cut up the ingredients, and make sure Riddle didn’t create a poison when he tore his eyes away.

‘If you don’t do that neater, Slughorn will make you stay behind and practice again.’

Harry’s knife froze. ‘Yeah—no way. Truce or not, I’m not doing extra potions with you.’

Riddle didn’t look up from his stirring. The potion already looked exactly as it did in the textbook. ‘You think I enjoy teaching people how to chop?’

‘Maybe?’

‘Well I don’t. It’s very dull.’

‘You’re probably too busy plotting to overthrow the ministry,’ Harry said.

‘Not get a job?’

‘Nope. Definitely overthrow.’

It wasn’t meant to be like this. Riddle should be annoyed, not amused. He was meant to leave Harry alone. Instead they were *bantering*.

Harry went back to his chopping. There was no way Slughorn would actually notice if a few of the daisies were uneven, was there?

‘It’s NEWTS,’ Riddle said, watching him. ‘And Slytherins are held to a higher standard than others.’

Harry didn’t say anything. Riddle’s voice was light, but he knew where he was getting with this Slytherin business. It would soon turn into *house-loyalty* and *Death-Eaters*. The words were enough to make him gag.

To avoid it, he asked what Riddle was doing for his potions project.

He had stopped stirring to watch Harry chop. A strange expression came over his face, and he leaned in, like he was telling a secret. '*Amortentia.'*

Harry blinked. 'Great. Isn't that too advanced?' He glanced at him. 'Actually, nevermind.'

Amortentia? The most powerful love potion in the world?

A horrible thought occurred to him. Merope Gaunt had fed Tom Riddle Senior love potion. Did Riddle know? Was that why? When Harry looked at his face, curled up in something smug and secretive, he suspected he did. His eyes were too knowing, too wrapped up in his own thoughts and secrets.

'What about you then?' he asked.

Harry fidgeted in his seat. 'Dunno yet. I haven't had time to think.'

The potion fumes were starting to make him feel sick. The thick clouds of purple smoke stung his eyes.

Why was he making *that?* It was all so strange, and Riddle was too close. Their legs were nearly touching. He didn't know when that had happened.

He twisted around in his seat and looked for his friends. Hermione didn't notice him, her eyes never leaving her cauldron. But Ron saw and shook his head. He gave Harry a look as though to say, *what the hell*? Wide and surprised and accusing. The same one Hermione made when she said to *not let his guard down.*

Harry turned away. He wasn't doing anything wrong. What was he meant to do, sit in silence? Of course he had to talk to him. But it felt like he had crossed an invisible line, at least in Ron's eyes. And Harry hadn't. It was fine. Really.

Being friendly to Riddle was not the same thing as trusting him. Even liking him. Ron just didn't understand.

Intoxication

Chapter Notes

> Warning for underage drinking, near stupors and potion shenanigans. See end notes (which include spoilers) if this upsets you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The minute the bell rang and potion class ended, Harry made for the door. He got into the corridor, leaving an amused Riddle behind, but ended up behind half a dozen Gryffindors, including Ron and Hermione. He could have groaned. Just the two people he was avoiding.

‘What are you doing?’ Hermione said, when they were out of earshot from their classmates. ‘You can’t *befriend* him.’

‘That’s baby You-Know-Who,’ Ron said.

‘There’s nothing baby about Riddle,’ Harry said, but that only made Ron frown and Hermione’s face to harden. He continued quickly. ‘We’re only being civil.’

‘As long as civil doesn’t make you delusional. He isn’t a misunderstood little boy, Harry. He’s a monster.’

‘I know he is,’ Harry said. The crowd had parted and he walked forward but Ron and Hermione only followed.

‘Don’t get wrapped up in all the Slytherin stuff,’ Ron said. ‘It’s nonsense. Let’s focus on getting back to our time.’

‘The connection with Riddle will go when we go,’ Hermione said.

Along with him.

Harry took off his glasses and rubbed them on his robes. ‘And then I’ll just have one with *Voldemort* to worry about.’

Ron flinched at the name. Hermione’s face clouded over.

The thought of the future made something inside him constrict. It was painful to think about; all his nerves bundled together in a tight ball.

The world they were going back to was unbearable. It was living in the tent and eating scraps. Constantly waiting for an attack. Waiting for news that someone in the Order was gone, or a loved one was dead. That they were too late and Voldemort had became angry. Had found out their plans.

And they were willingly—actively—trying to get back there. Back to where everything would be Harry's responsibility.

'We'll have our families,' Ron said, picking up on Harry's thoughts. 'Don't say you don't have one. You're part of mine. And you, Hermione.'

Harry's throat seemed to close. He didn't know what to say—a mixture of *it's not the same* and *thank you.*

He simply nodded. 'I'll see you later. I need to meet Dumbledore—Occlumency.'

As he made his way to his office, he tried to get their worried faces from his mind.

Don't befriend Riddle.

He wasn't. He wouldn't. Did they have no trust in him?

He reached Dumbledore's office and pulled the door open. Fawkes' plumage had faded to a dull brown colour. He was drooped over on his perch and barely stirred when Harry entered. Dumbledore, in similar fashion, had his eyes closed.

Harry hovered awkwardly on the threshold. 'Sir?'

The eyes flickered open.

'Is this a bad time?'

'Not at all,' Dumbledore said. 'I insisted on now, didn't I? I was meditating. You may have heard of it, I picked it up from muggles. Incredibly relaxing, Harry. Would you care to join?'

Harry had a disturbing image of them both sitting there, eyes closed and cross-legged, listening to Fawkes' dying screeches. 'I'm fine.'

Dumbledore's face didn't change but his eyes betrayed his amusement. 'Very well. Occlumency. Have you had any progress with clearing your mind?'

'Not really,' Harry said. 'I try before I sleep, but it makes no difference. I always end up dreaming. Or in Riddle's dreams. And his Occlumency is great so I don't understand.' He rubbed his head. 'I want it to stop.'

'This connection with Mr. Riddle goes back to when Voldemort tried to kill you as an infant?'

'You said so. In the future.'

But you also kept many secrets, sir.

'But that makes no sense,' Harry added. 'Because it wasn't Riddle. And it can't be the wands. Not causing this. I always thought my scar—but that makes no sense anymore. It hurts all the time.'

To his horror, his voice cracked at the end. It was too much. Pain bursting behind his eyes out of nowhere. Causing his mood to change, him to lash out.

It should be gone here.

'Somehow I don't think *Occlumency's* going to fix it.'

Dumbledore nodded, stroking his long, auburn beard. 'How does your scar feel now?'

'It's fine.' Harry touched his forehead to prove it. 'Normal.'

'Would you like to discontinue these lessons?'

'No,' Harry said immediately. 'I need them in case Riddle tries Legilimency.'

He hesitated. 'What if he dreams something and finds out about the future? Everyone keeps saying to not get him suspicious. But I *can't* stop that if it happens. Because of this stupid connection. They think I can just ignore it and hope it goes away.'

He cleared his throat, glancing quickly at Dumbledore. 'Will we start Occlumency, sir?'

Dumbledore shook his head. 'Harry, sit down. Occlumency can be saved for later.'

Harry sunk into the soft cushions of the chair and bit back his protests. He didn't *want* to do Occlumency and rip up all those memories. Not now.

'Would you like some tea? Maybe something stronger?'

Harry shook his head.

'What about something sweet? I'm partial to the trifle we serve on Sunday. The house-elves could bring it up.'

'I'm really fine,' Harry said. 'Are you sure you don't want to do Occlumency?'

'No,' Dumbledore said. And he sighed, soft and terrible. 'I want to talk, Harry. About people and the choices they have to make.'

Harry wanted the tea now. Anything to appear occupied.

'You feel an immense pressure to always do the right thing for your friends. But in a situation like this, confusion is expected. The link you have with Voldemort is stronger here.'

'Stronger than ever,' Harry said.

'Naturally, Mr Weasley and Miss Granger will be weary. You have entered a new time and place. Everything is foreign. They are never met Tom Riddle before.'

Harry shook his head. 'I don't think they would have wanted to.'

The thought of them interacting was both amusing and disturbing.

'And you understand that instinctively,' Dumbledore said. 'Not because of Voldemort, but because what you know of Tom. Mr Weasley and Miss Granger only hear your stories. They see Tom, who is Head-Boy and well respected, and then Voldemort and the stories from his past. Fear of the unknown is the most dangerous. We worry about things we don't understand.'

'But they think I can shut it all off. Ignore Riddle even though he's *in my head.* ' Harry thought about how mad he sounded and hastily continued. 'What if he kills someone? Or what if we go back to the future and everything has changed? Everyone's dead because one day I told Abraxas he should consider painting. Or because someone overheard a conversation?'

The prophecy could change. Voldemort might never be defeated. None of them born.

'If you ruin everything,' Dumbledore said, his eyes eerily intense. 'Then

that's what happens.'

Harry blinked. ‘Excuse me, sir, but *what?’*

'Things happen that we can’t control. Life is not a bulleted list to follow. Things will happen and you will regret them, Harry. The future will change in ways that are wonderful and terrible. But you are not fate. It is not on your shoulders.’

'It’s been—all my life—it's been my *job.* It's what I do.'

You left me this job, he thought. *The future you.*

But he held his tongue. Because Dumbledore looked sad, pensive and far away, and Harry didn’t want to hurt him, not when he had only got him back.

'I made all the wrong choices when I was younger,’ he said. 'I think you suspected. Perhaps this is public knowledge in the future. But I shall tell you. The situation with Gellert reminds me of where you are now. Although you are a much stronger man than I was.’

Harry's mouth was dry. Gellert. Gellert Grindelwald.

'We were boys. Boys with too much power and a desire to show it off. We wanted to rule the world. I had the hunger Mr. Riddle has – the burning desire to show I was the best. To not only dazzle the world but control it. And like him, I thought I was unstoppable. What was the world against us? Against ambition? Against love?”

His voice was still steady, though it had taken on a soft quality. ‘That's where my similarities with Mr. Riddle ended. We had the ambition—the hopes—but I was blinded by Gellert and our plans. Did I know it was wrong? Maybe deep in my heart, but I chose to be blind.

'As a young man, I ruined everything. Look at him now and the havoc he causes. The deaths, the bodies counts, the families torn apart. And me?'

He laid his palms flat. 'A transfiguration teacher hoping his problems will disappear.’

‘You’re not just a Transfiguration teacher,’ Harry said. ‘In the future, you’re on a chocolate frog card. You’re one of the greatest wizards in the world. And Grindelwald being a Dark Lord isn’t your fault. Even if you helped him or encouraged him. He chose to do it.’

'Then why, Harry, does it feel as if everything comes back to a man whose job is to pick up the pieces he let shatter years ago?'

'You couldn't have stopped him,' Harry said.

But you do, he thought. *You do and I don't know how you do it.*

'I had choices, as you do, Harry. So many choices stretching in a dozen directions. I chose the wrong ones. You think I please everyone and always make the better decision, but I'm afraid sometimes I please no-one but myself.'

'You didn't cause him to start a *war.'*

'Then Riddle? Destined to become a monster and to ruin lives. Is that entirely in your hands? If things escalate in ways we can't fix, how does it stem from you?'

'Because I got us here.' Out loud, the words carried an invisible weight. A truth.

'Is it my job to stop Gellert, the way I should have in the past? Do I feel every death he causes?'

'No,' Harry said immediately. But Dumbledore's face—older than ever, more anguished than any face should be—said *yes.*

'So Riddle isn't just my problem,' Harry said, his voice desperate. 'And Grindelwald isn't yours. I don't care what you did, everything that has happened since isn't your fault.'

There was silence.

And then Dumbledore smiled. As though this whole thing had been to prove something to *Harry.* But Dumbledore couldn't disguise the tiredness in his voice, the weariness, no matter what lesson he taught.

'Mr Weasley and Miss Granger look to you for guidance. And the future you come from does likewise. But the future is a mysterious thing, ever-changing and inescapable. You have to allow the possibility things will happen you cannot control. You are not me when I was a young man, but someone with a rational head and a desire to do the right thing. Let it go, Harry. You don't have a war to fight here.'

'Ok,' he said, his tongue heavy. 'Ok, I'll try.'

Could he allow the possibility that this whole thing wasn't his fault? If Riddle ruined their plans it wasn't because of only him?

You don't have a war to fight here.

He glanced at Dumbledore. Fawkes made a weak, crooning noise. 'Sir, I'm sorry.'

Dumbledore frowned. 'Whatever for?'

'Grindelwald. I know it's not my business, but it must have been hard. *Be* hard. If someone I loved turned out the way he did--'

Ron. Hermione. Ginny.

'—I don't know if I'd manage half as well as you do.'

He hesitated, feeling it wasn't his place to go on. But Dumbledore didn't seem to mind. He was silent for a moment and then he smiled. Beneath his spectacles, his eyes were strangely bright.

'Thank you.'

Harry hadn't thought about the Slug Club since earlier in potions. Hadn't wanted to think about it, if he was honest.

He was imagining a couple dozen students around a long table and Slughorn's funny chortle that made his neck fat shake. Awkward laughter and painful silences. He thought at least—at *least* —Abraxas would be there, even if it was full of snooty purebloods vying for the limelight.

But when Professor Slughorn came to their Common Room that evening, he took Harry and the others aside and said this was no ordinary meeting. No, it was a *party*.

'To celebrate our win against Ravenclaw. A little treat coming up to Halloween.' He looked meaningfully at Harry. 'What do you say?'

I'd prefer to go swallow poison.

'Great.'

‘My office at seven then, everyone. And you may see a few famous faces. Be ready.’

The Slytherins perked right up.

Harry suppressed a sigh. The last party he had been to was with Luna. The highlight had been Malfoy crashing it and Harry following him under his invisibility cloak. He somehow didn’t think this one would be the same.

'Well, you look glum,' Abraxas said, when Slughorn left to track some younger students. 'Don't fancy meeting Slughorn's celebrities?'

'No, I do,' Harry lied. ‘Celebrities are great.’

Except they're all probably dead in my time.

'You don't look it,' Abraxas said, and shook his head in amusement. 'But you can leave after an hour. Sluggy won't mind.'

'Yes, Harry,' Riddle said, coming up beside them. 'I thought you would love to meet rich, influential Quidditch captains. Isn’t that your ambition?’

Harry rolled his eyes. 'It's *you* who likes the rich and influential.’ Riddle smirked like he agreed.

'There's always food and firewhiskey,' Abraxas said, looking a bit desperate. 'What about that?'

'Sounds about the best part,' Harry said, ignoring Riddle’s scoff.

‘*Anyway* -’ Riddle said, his face the opposite of innocent. ‘Harry here has to go. He can’t anger Professor Slughorn. What if he suggested more remedial potion classes?’

‘Stop mentioning that,’ Harry muttered, thinking of that awful day. ‘I’m *definitely* going now.’

Riddle was grinning and Harry tried hard to keep his face looking annoyed.

Abraxas glanced between them and his brow furrowed. ‘Great?’

‘Anything to get out of those lessons,’ Harry said without heat.

Riddle was about to retort but looking over Harry’s shoulder, he fell

silent. ‘Will you go with me then, Harry?’

Harry turned around. It was Belinda. She ducked her head when she caught his eye so her hair fell in a curtain over her face.

‘*What?’* he said and Riddle stilled.

‘To Slughorn’s party.’ She raised her eyebrows. The little smile playing on her lips slid away. ‘Unless you don’t want to?’

Harry blinked rather stupidly at her. ‘I—I have a girlfriend.’

They all turned to look at him.

‘What?’ Abraxas said. ‘Since when? Is it Granger?’

‘No,’ Harry said, and laughed at the thought. ‘She’s practically my sister.’ Then his grin faded. ‘Actually—we sort of broke up. And I won’t see her now. While at Hogwarts so —’

Ever. Would he ever see Ginny again?

Maybe she would be happier without him.

Abraxas nodded sympathetically. ‘Hard luck. Of course things would be difficult because of Grindelwald.’ He winced when mentioning it, glancing at Belinda and Riddle.

'Yeah, well I wanted her to be safe. Harry wasn’t sure he had ever said that aloud before.

Belinda cleared her throat. ‘This is a very touching moment but I think you have the wrong idea. I’m actually with someone.’

‘Who?’ Harry said.

Belinda’s smile seemed to tighten. ‘It hardly matters. He’s older. Doesn’t go to Hogwarts anymore.’

She cleared her throat and looked at him expectantly. 'Anyway, Slughorn's party?'

Harry felt an enormous relief that her intentions were not, in fact, to date him. ‘Okay,’ he said and her smile was back.

He could feel Abraxas and Riddle watching them and it made him want to squirm.

It was only when Friday stretched around that Harry realised he had no dress robes. They were in the dorm. Rosier was applying something from a tub into his hair and Alphard was reading a Quidditch magazine while performing a charm on his shoes. When Harry asked about it, he gave him an affronted look and said the floor was full of spills. 'And you *always* want to make a good impression.'

Abraxas was rummaging in his trunk. 'Borrow mine,' he said. 'I have maybe—ten pairs?'

Alphard let out a laugh. 'Ten pairs? Try twenty.'

Abraxas flushed. 'We have a lot of events," he sniffed. 'Balls and gatherings. *You* should know.'

'I don't need new robes for each of them,' Alphard replied. 'Us Blacks—we're the simple sort.'

They both laughed. Harry would have joined in, but he had no way to explain how he knew the madness of the Black family, with their stuffed house-elf heads and deadly artefacts.

'We're probably the same size,' Abraxas said to Harry. 'But you can adjust them anyway. Here.'

He threw a pair of robes at him, not glancing up. 'You want a grey trim or a green?'

'As long as it doesn't have the Malfoy crest, I don't mind.'

'Green then. A bit of Slytherin pride.' Another pair of black robes flew at him, identical in Harry's opinion, apart from the green around the hems.

'Great, thanks.'

When he saw Alphard and Abraxas' robes, it was difficult to stifle his laughter. They were probably the pinnacle of pureblood fashion, but to Harry they looked like what Ron had worn to the Yule Bale: trimmed with lace on the collars and cuffs and buttoned halfway up the neck.Harry had a memory of him and Ron frantically casting the severing charm.

‘You ready to go?’ Abraxas said, eyes going to Harry’s hair. He tried to flatten it as they left the dorms.

In the Common Room, the girls were waiting. Belinda looked very pretty in golden dress robes. Harry knew nothing about clothes but the material was light and floaty, the ends sparkling as though woven with magic. With her pale hair and features, swathed in shimmering gold, she looked ethereal.

‘Hello, Harry.’

Belinda was intimidating, more so than the other Slytherins. He didn’t know what it was but as she stood there, perfectly serene, he had to resist the urge to flee. Instead he gave her his arm.

‘You clean up well.’

He laughed nervously. ‘So do you,’ he said. ‘Not that you don’t always look nice. I mean, you do, of course. Er—’

He winced, but the babbling made her eyes soften and she didn’t seem half as intimidating.

‘Come on then.’ She tugged his arm. ‘Let’s be normal teenagers for a night.’

They made their way to Slughorn’s office. Her pace did not match her height for Belinda walked extremely fast and Harry nearly tripled over her robes several times. When they reached the doors, they both hesitated.

‘You don’t want to go in either?’ Harry said.

Belinda laughed softly. ‘It’s not that. I’m preparing.’ And her face shifted, a smile coming to her lips, and she tossed her hair backwards and pushed open the doors.

The flood of sounds greeted them. There were a hundred voices talking at once in what looked nothing like an office anymore. Expanded considerably, from the ceiling were drapes of green. The lights were dimmed and instead of candles there was a colourful plant in the centre of the room, emitting a kaleidoscope of flashing colours. Two large tables contained food and where there should be a desk was a massive foundation, trickling with some sort of drink.

The room was packed with people, mostly Slytherins. Harry spotted a

few Ravenclaws, along with Alastor Moody and his friend, Diggory.

‘There you are,’ Slughorn said, coming through the crowd. ‘The man of the night. And lovely Belinda, of course—how are you, my dear?’

Her fingers tightened on Harry’s arm. Her fingernails were red and sharp enough to make him wince. ‘I’m wonderful. And yourself, professor?’

He gave a deep laugh. ‘I’ll be better when I get a drink in me.’ Then he winked and hurried off.

Harry watched him go over to the fountain in the middle of the room and strike up a conversation with an elderly man wearing a purple feathered hat. Belinda released his arm, and her sugary smile slipped. 'Let's go find the others.'

'Are you ok?' Harry said, hurrying after her.

‘I’m fine, Harry. Slughorn’s just annoying.’

But when they reached Abraxas and Lucretia, who were both near the food table and launched into conversation, she fiddled with the hem of her golden robes.

'We can leave if you want,' Harry said, his voice low. ‘I don’t want to be here either.”

If anything it only made her smile strain. ‘You’re sweet, Harry. I’m just thinking. Sometimes I wish I wasn't a Slytherin at all.'

Her voice was strange: bitter and wistful and perhaps even vulnerable.

Harry looked at Abraxas who was taking food from one of the tables while nodding his head attentively to an old witch half his height. Lucretia was now with Rosier, both of them talking to a wizard, smiles similar to Belinda’s false one.

'I know what you mean,' he agreed. Unlike her, he had once not been a Slytherin. 'But all the houses have their faults. Are you sure you don't want to go?'

She shook her head, expression clearing. ‘Let’s get a drink. I could certainly do with one. Could you?’

'Definitely.'

Following her to the drink fountain, Harry recognised the reddish-brown liquid immediately. It was firewhiskey. He glanced around to see if there were any professors in the vicinity.

'You know, it's charmed against anyone under seventeen,' Belinda said, watching him. 'You can relax.'

The firewhiskey burned his throat on the way down, making his whole body warm. The discomfort about being here dimmed somewhat, along with all his thoughts.

'Perks of the Slug Club,' Belinda said, taking a cup also. 'Slughorn has expensive tastes.'

They settled into silence. Belinda seemed content to just stay there, away from most of the people, and watch them.

After a few moments he turned to her. 'So why are you here then? You don't have to be.'

She shrugged and pointed a finger towards a woman in a long green robe. 'You see her?'

'Yeah?'

'Edith Parkinson. She's in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. I want to talk to her.'

'Do you want to work there?' Harry said.

She gave him a funny look, like the question surprised her. 'If I could. To start with of course.'

She sat her drink on one of the tables. 'And him over there?' This time she pointed a finger at one of the students, a boy wearing frayed dress robes and a pointed black hat. 'That's Julian Flint. He's here because his daddy's in charge of Azkaban.'

'Azkaban?' Harry repeated.

'Old Arnoldo Flint. Haven't you heard of him?' She seemed to find it funny. 'They practically invite the Dementors around for Sunday dinner.'

Harry took another mouthful of firewhiskey. Belinda was still watching the boy.

‘He looks normal, doesn’t he? But do you know they lowered the Azkaban sentence? And made sure even the low security cells are under constant watch.’

Harry looked away from the boy, afraid to be caught staring. ‘I suppose I’d invite him to my party too then.’

‘Exactly. And there’s Conor Macmillan. Do you want and talk to him?’

She noticed his blank look. ‘You know, on the *English Quidditch team.’*

‘Oh,’ Harry said, feigning surprise. ‘I knew he looked familiar. But I’ve had enough celebrities for a while.’

Belinda shook her head and took another drink of her firewhiskey. ‘You are odd, Harry. It’s not a bad thing.’

She pointed again. There was a gleam in her eyes. ‘You see that witch Abraxas is talking to?’

Harry squinted. They were on the other side of the room but Abraxas stood out with his white-blonde hair. The woman was tall and dressed in purple. She had a long, sharp nose.

‘What about her?’ Harry said.

Belinda lowered her voice conspiringly. ‘His mother wants him to marry her.’

Harry turned to stare at her. Abraxas was inching away from the woman, putting more distance between them every second. She was old enough to *be* his mother and looked it too, in her small glasses and old-fashioned robes.

‘That’s pureblood culture for you,’ Belinda said. ‘But the Malfoys aren’t too strict. And Abraxas is a boy, of course. He won’t be forced.’

Her gloom seemed to have disappeared. Now she pointed out different people to Harry, telling him stories so absurd he thought they were fake.

The firewhiskey blocked out the noise and left him feeling warm. The party wasn’t terrible, especially when Belinda told him a story about the previous Slug Club meeting, which involved the breaking of Slughorn’s priceless lamp.

Harry was laughing and Belinda had that little smile on her face. It

didn't even ruin his mood when he heard Riddle's smooth voice, effortlessly inserting himself into the conversation.

'Is this the little recluse corner?'

Belinda stood up straighter, her hands reaching to smooth her hair.

'Yes,' Harry said bluntly. 'So go and bother someone else.'

Belinda looked at him in horror. 'You're always welcome,' she said firmly. 'Are you at least having fun?'

'I suppose it isn't awful.'

He was wearing black robes with many silver buttons and his hair was combed to one side, so it fell in soft curls. Harry was reminded of the movie stars in the black and white films Aunt Petunia watched.

'I was talking to the Minister's secretary. A delightful man.'

Harry scoffed and Riddle's grin grew.

'You disagree?'

'I'm just questioning your idea of fun.'

'Well, Harry,' Riddle murmured. 'Sometimes a little charm pays off.'

Harry swallowed. 'Great for you then. Go and have more fun.'

'No, I don't think I will.' Riddle took a step forward, looked at the cup in Harry's hand and then back to his face. 'Why would I, when here is so much better?'

Harry huffed, finishing off the firewhiskey. But Riddle didn't move, only stood there, a smirk on his face.

'Maybe Slughorn will be too intoxicated to teach tomorrow. Wouldn't that be pleasant?'

They both turned to look at Slughorn, who was now stumbling slightly and laughing so loud it made Harry wince.

'Does he do that a lot?' Harry said.

'Only if the occasion calls,' Riddle said. 'Which is to say two or three times a month.'

Harry suppressed his laughter but Riddle caught it anyway.

‘Do you know how easy it is to stir up a secret, Harry?’ Even in the midst of a party, his voice was perfectly audible. Clear and intense, like the spark in his eye.

‘You would know, wouldn’t you?’

‘When people are like this’—Riddle scanned the room—'They’re just waiting to cause a scene. It’s easy.’

‘I don’t care about how you manipulate our poor classmates,’ Harry said. ‘Or how much practice you have.’

‘Don’t you?’

He couldn’t disagree. He did find it interesting, in a strange way. Like the way people did with serial killer documentaries.

‘For example, when Rosier has a few drinks he starts *dancing.’* Riddle wrinkled his nose in distaste.

It was not what he had expected. ‘Can you kick him out of the dorm if that happens?’ Harry said.

Riddle tilted his head. ‘I could. But he’ll pass out in the Common Room anyway. Along with our other . . . friends.’

‘You’re horrible.’ Harry was unable to hide his grin at the way he said *friends.* ‘I see why you’re so keen to corrupt this bunch now, Riddle. They’re charming.’

Riddle laughed. ‘It’s Tom.’

Harry blinked—looked at his bright, earnest face and the way his white teeth glinted in the lights—and shook his head. ‘No way.’

Because if it was Tom, that meant he wasn’t Voldemort. It meant something had changed. Something he couldn’t go back on. When it was *Riddle*, things were safe. Normal. But Tom was strange and foreign and much too familiar. And Harry couldn't afford to forget who he truly was.

‘Why not? It’s just a name.’

‘Why do you care then?’ Harry said. ‘If it’s just a name.’

Riddle's smile turned from amused to dangerous. His voice was still light but there was an edge to it now, as though Harry had annoyed him.

'I don't,' he said. 'If calling me by my surname lets you keep up your grand delusions, then happily do so. But Riddle or Tom—you know it doesn't matter.'

But it did, at least to Harry, and Riddle looked like he wanted to hear it. Harry's throat was dry and the noise was all a murmur in the background. The air was full of the unspoken, the silence palpable.

Someone cleared their throat and they both turned around. Belinda.

Harry had forgotten about her. She was holding two cups in her hands and passed one to Harry. "The firewhiskey's nearly gone,' she said. 'I thought you might want more.'

He took it, blinking. 'Thanks.'

"Do you want any, Tom?"

Riddle looked at her, shook his head, and looked back at Harry. 'I'm fine. What more could I need?'

'I can think of a few things,' Harry muttered. The tension seemed to thaw. 'You sure you don't have any more ministers to charm?'

Riddle nodded approvingly. 'Oh, good idea.'

As he walked past, his shoulder brushed Harry's. Harry could *feel* him smirking, all smugness and amusement and satisfaction rolled in one.

When he was gone, Belinda frowned. 'You two are getting on better,' she said. 'But you shouldn't be so rude. It's only a matter of time before he gets annoyed.'

Harry drank the firewhiskey she had handed him. 'Let's hope so,' he said, which only made her shake her head. But she didn't argue. In fact, she seemed distracted.

'Oh, there's Slughorn,' Harry said. He was coming right towards them. 'Wanna hide?'

She didn't.

Instead they ended up talking to several of the guests. Harry didn't

find it in him to protest. His whole body felt warm and fuzzy and it was difficult to concentrate.

Time moved too quickly. The Head of some Department merged into a Potion Master and a Daily Prophet writer. The noise seemed to crawl into his brain. His eyes were beginning to droop close, fighting against the flashing lights.

He sat his drink on one of the empty tables and Belinda snatched it up. ‘Shit,’ she said. ‘You’re drunk.’

How was he drunk?

Harry couldn’t find the words to disagree. Everything was too heavy—his limbs, his head, his tongue.

‘I’ll get you to your dorm.’

He let Belinda tug him out of Slughorn’s office and down the corridors. They went past two giggling girls going into a broom-closet and the Ravenclaw prefect, who gave them a dirty look. Harry almost tripped on his feet. The ground was right in front of his eyes.

‘I’m sorry, Harry, come on.’

Belinda. She was right there beside him.

Harry opened his mouth—a sudden thought had occurred to him. ‘Sorry for ruining your night.’ The words were thick, jumbling together.

‘Don’t say that,’ she said sharply. The intensity of her voice sent a stab of pain through his head.

They reached the Common Room and she helped him through the Portrait Hole. Everything was blurring together. He just wanted to sleep: sleep and sleep, maybe for a few centuries. Was it too much to ask?

It took supreme effort not to fall over. They were at boys dormitory and she pulled the door open. Harry was ready to surrender into the blur of colours. He couldn’t fight to keep his eyes open any more, it was making him dizzy.

‘Look, get to bed, ok?’ Belinda seemed to shove him into his four-poster. ‘You’ll be better in the morning.’

But that couldn’t be right.

‘What’s—wrong with—me—?’

The words took too much effort. His mind was too boggled, too confused to make sense of it.

‘You’re drunk,’ she said shortly. ‘You had too much firewhiskey.’

He had never felt like this before. ‘Ok, Bel—Belinda. Thanks.’

Her face had blurred in with all the other colours but for a moment, he swore she looked almost sad. She stood there, beside his trunk, until he couldn’t keep his eyes open anymore. ‘Goodnight, Harry.’

He wanted to ask. Wanted to wonder. But the urge got too strong, the voice screaming in his head died away, and in an instant, a single blink, his eyelids gave up. Everything disappeared.

Chapter End Notes

> Warning: Harry gets given a potion without his consent which causes him to lose sensibility and understanding of what's going on.

Echoes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Harry woke up feeling fuzzy. His head was too heavy to lift, his eyes were stiff, and his mouth tasted oddly sweet. The light was too bright, the bed too warm.

With a groan, he sat up. Everything tilted before shifting into place. Steadying himself, he got up.

The dormitory had that eerie silence that meant it was exceptionally early or late. There was a very faint snoring from Abraxas' bed which meant the former and all the curtains were pulled shut.

Harry wracked his brain. What had happened? His mind was too muddled to focus clearly on the previous night. He remembered Slughorn's party and remembered Riddle smirking.

Call me Tom.

He remembered drinking firewhiskey, and Belinda, and then leaving.

And then —then—

She had taken him to the boys dorm. He closed his eyes. Oh god. He had been *drunk*.

Hadn't he?

When he thought hard on the second part of the night, it all jumbled together.

'Remembering?' someone said.

Harry half-opened his eyes and saw Alphard. He was wearing a Quidditch jersey but unlike Harry, looked wide-awake.

'Unfortunately.'

'Well, you got lucky.' He snickered. 'Some of us didn't make the bed.'

He pointed his foot towards a lumpy outline beside one of the four-posters.

Harry moved forward to see and laughed. It was Rosier, passed out on the floor. Drool was coming from his open mouth.

'Not pretty, is it?' Alphard said.

Harry felt a twisted pleasure. After every snide remark Rosier had made, he deserved this.

‘Practically Sleeping Beauty,’ Harry agreed and Alphard stared at him blankly.

He sighed. 'I'm going to the bathroom.'

He was going to scrub the taste of firewhiskey from his mouth. Permanently. Harry shuddered at the thought of it. He didn't want to go near the drink again. Even *think* of it.

How had he gotten so drunk? He wasn’t sure.

But then he had never *been* drunk. Maybe it was all normal.

When he was finished in the bathroom—the mirror had given him a disapproving look and told him to smile—he went to the Common Room.

There was someone lying stretched out on the sofa, dead to the world. She was snoring very loudly, mouth hanging open, and still wearing dress robes.

Harry looked around for Belinda—he needed to apologise for ruining her night and get her to tell him what he missed. But she wasn’t there. No one was, except a few of the younger students and Riddle.

Of course.

'Harry,' Riddle said, gesturing vaguely at the space beside him. Harry wearily came over.

'Rough night?' Riddle glanced him up and down and Harry bristled, fighting the urge to flatten his hair.

‘Some of us don’t wake up wearing ironed robes,’ he said. ‘And no, it was boring.’

‘Boring,’ Riddle said. ‘Oh, *Harry*. Where’s Belinda?’

Harry frowned. ‘What do you mean?’

Riddle's brow furrowed. 'You left with her,' he said, very slowly and very pointedly. Harry stared at him blankly and Riddle's eyes flickered towards the boys' stairs.

'What? No!' He gawked at him. 'Isn't she engaged?'

Riddle just raised his eyebrows.

Harry sat down. He thought he would topple over if he didn't. Standing up was much like spinning in a circle. 'Actually, she just took me to my dorm,' he said.

'*Why*?'

Harry absently rubbed his head. 'I was—you know—'

'Drunk,' he supplied.

'Yeh. I think so.'

Riddle cocked his head to the side, staring at him as though he was a strange puzzle. 'You think so?' he repeated.

'Well, I haven't—you know, before—'

Riddle laughed and Harry scowled.

'Why are you so happy anyway?'

Riddle's grin broadened. 'Because unlike some people, I can remember my nights. And I take those parties for what they are—opportunities.'

'That's not what they are,' Harry said. 'They're*parties*. The key's in the name. I thought you would at least get that.'

'It must have slipped my mind,' Riddle agreed. 'I was too busy talking to the Minister's assistant. Let's just say he loved me.'

Harry scoffed. 'I can't imagine why.'

'Well, unlike you, most would disagree.' His voice was perfectly smug. 'I'm quite the charmer.'

'Yeh, to a bunch of idiots.' Harry shook his head. 'So you talked to some assistant. No, you're right. That *does* sound wonderful. Can I come next time?'

Riddle chose to ignore the sarcasm. 'Maybe if you can handle the firewhiskey,' he said. 'And Belinda finds another date.'

'I *wasn't* her date.'

Was that what people would think?

'Of course not, Harry. I'm sure she had entirely different reasons.'

The sentence made Harry feel uneasy but Riddle didn't notice. He wasn't aware his joke had piqued Harry's feeling of apprehension.

'Has anyone ever told you that you're annoying?' Harry said, shaking it off.

Riddle seemed to think for a moment. '*No*.'

'Well, you are. They're too scared. You're *very* annoying.'

'And yet you're still here.'

Harry blinked. 'What?'

'If I'm so annoying then leave.'

'You called me over!' The protest sounded weak even to him.

'And do you always do what you're told? What a good boy you are.'

It wasn't like that at all. Harry *tried* to avoid Riddle. The problem was, he was everywhere.

'So am I annoying, Harry, or are you secretly entertained?'

'I might add arrogant to the list as well,' Harry said, choosing to ignore it.

But Riddle's face was triumphant. Smug.

'Why do you always look like you're plotting murder?' Harry wondered aloud.

Riddle leaned back in his chair. 'I'm not now.' As if that appeased Harry in the slightest. 'You're still on about that then?'

'It's a little hard not to be. You literally have a gang.'

And if Harry didn't remind himself, he was afraid he would forget.

Riddle looked affronted. ‘It’s not a *gang*.’

‘A cult then. Servants. Is that better?’

‘Slightly.’

‘And you were talking to the Minister’s assistant.’ Harry narrowed his eyes. ‘To influence him? Overthrow the ministry?’

‘Now, why would I overthrow the ministry? You don’t think I’d ever like to join?’

Harry answered immediately. ‘No.’

‘Well, you are right. Because I’m going to rule the world.’

He sat back and Harry looked at him, radiating conviction, and felt cold. ‘That's why we can never get along. Because you—you're—’

On the path to Voldemort and proud of it.

Riddle's eyebrows furrowed at Harry’s sudden venom. 'Evil, aren't I? To poor Hagrid and all the mudbloods? Don't you already know that? Are you forgetting?’

'I'm not,’ he snapped. ‘I'm just saying —you want to rule the world. Become some sort of Dark Lord.'

And you will. You will.

He stopped. There was no point. Because there was no guilt in Riddle's eyes—no realisation dawning, no sudden regret.

'Does it hurts your little conscience to associate with me?’ Riddle said. ‘Don't we have a truce?'

Harry took a breath. They did. A horrible, horrible truce that was messing with his mind in so many ways.

'Yeah, until we break our connection. But then that's it.'

Then Harry would be back in the future.

They looked at each other, Riddle’s face unnaturally serious. He was always smirking or grinning, or smug with the thought that he had the upper hand. But now it was only watchful. More intense than any gaze Harry had ever felt.

The girl lying on the sofa let out a loud snore and Harry jumped.

‘Good talk.’ Riddle stood up. “You might want to take your morals to someone who cares. Because they’re just words, Harry. Childish beliefs you still follow.’ He didn’t look a bit sorry.

Harry watched him walk away.

Wanker.

Then—no—

Evil.

Riddle didn’t understand. He wouldn’t. *Couldn't.* He was doing something to Harry’s head, twisting it up with all his sly remarks and jokes. Doing what he did to everyone.

The connection was too much to handle. He was going to snap—and the dangerous thing was, he didn’t know what the results would be.

Riddle reached the Portrait Hole and the wall slid open automatically. It made a loud noise as it closed, blocking out his footsteps.

The minute he left, Harry clutched his forehead. It was curious. His scar, which had been fine up until then, was beginning to hurt.

It wasn't until much later that he saw Belinda.

It wasn’t like he had been consciously waiting, but the minute she came down the staircase he stood up and almost knocked over a footstool.

Her eyes widened as he came forward. ‘How are you feeling?’

Harry flushed. ‘Better. I wanted to apologise. For being so—drunk.’

She shook her head. ‘At least you're not an annoying drunk. Or a crier. Or one of those awful *boasters.’*

Her nose scrunched up. ‘Remember much?’

Harry chewed his lip. ‘Most of it. Except the end.’

She nodded, taking a breath. ‘That’s expected. Well, I still had a nice night.’

‘You did?’

From what he remembered she didn’t seem to enjoy it all that much.

‘I talked to the Ministry woman I wanted to. It was very much a success.’

‘Slytherins,’ Harry said, shaking his head.

Her smile grew a tiny bit strained. ‘Says the one himself. Well, Harry, I must be off. Walburga is in the most awful mood.’

Then she left.

He stared after her, mouth open to utter more words. But what would he even say?

Why couldn’t he go to a party and get drunk like a normal teenager without feeling worried?

Nothing had changed. He didn’t feel any different than yesterday. Everything was the same. The answer seemed to boil down, not to the events, but to Harry.

Was he going crazy?

A tiny, nagging voice in his head said *yes.*

The hours trickled by. Slughorn made an appearance in the Common Room, smiling and not looking like he had drank himself into a stupor at all. And, oddest of all, he congratulated them on a good party. Harry thought of Professor McGonagall and how she would react to a bunch of hungover students. It wouldn’t be pleasant.

Slughorn was so relaxed and lenient about everything, it was no wonder the Slytherins ran rampant, releasing basilisks and having secret meetings.

Abraxas gave Harry some concoction to cure a hangover — it tasted like a mixture of out-of-date eggs and the snot flavoured Bertie Botts bean. It done very little for Harry's head, though with the pain being scar-related, he hadn't suspected it would.

'I never want to drink again,' Abraxas complained, also drinking his 'cure.' 'It's not worth it.'

Harry wholeheartedly agreed. So this *was* what a hangover felt like. He let it ease away some of his doubts.

Only briefly did he see Ron and Hermione. The pair were arguing so much Harry didn't dare say anything that could cause a fight. It was like prodding two angry dragons. And when his friends decided to snipe at each other, Harry thought it was best to stay away.

At least the Slytherins were *quiet*. Whatever muggle-killing fantasies they had stayed firmly in their heads.

That night, sleep came fitfully. He tossed and turned and when he would drift off, it was to faint shapes in the corner of his vision. They seemed to laugh, over and over, until he woke up, tired and restless, and unable to focus. But sleep crept in, as it always did. Everything went black, his mind finally shutting off.

And then there was a sound. High and shrill, so alarming it made him leap up. Only he wasn't in his four-poster anymore.

Someone was grabbing his hand and dragging him through the dark. The ground was cold beneath his feet and he stood on something that felt like a nail.

A breeze crept up the sleeves of his shirt as the large shape tugged him into the night. They went tripping down steps, guessing where they were, and through a door. He could feel the muggles bodies inches from his. Dozens and dozens, cramming together.

He wrenched away from the dirty hands. How dare they touch him?

The door opened and he could see stars now, pinpricks of white. The air-raid siren was loud— so impossibly loud he could focus on nothing else.

The ground was a dark blur. The Muggles were shapes mixing in with the noise, echos in comparison to it.

'Down, everyone get down. C'mon, the tube's just a bit further — '

That noise ringing into the night.

He was going to die. An awful muggle death in this awful muggle city. With all the people he hated, reduced to nothing but an orphan.

He had his wand but what good was a wand against bombs? How would a shield charm hold up to hundreds of them, all going off at once. Enough to create a ripple that tore miles upon miles, made the entire ground explode.

Down on the dirty cement *—cold, cold, cold—*

A tube station; someone counting them all like it had been done a hundred times. Maybe it had, but he had been at Hogwarts.

—stay there, you're safe now—

But someone was crying and he wasn't safe, he wasn't. Never while he was here.

He was going to die in London, crouched on the ground like a beggar; a muggle. This time there really would be a bomb. There would be no orphanage to go back to, no children to fill it with.

Die, die, die —

The only thing to do was to stay alive, no matter what it took.

Otherwise . . .

He jumped out of bed.

Immediately, Harry lit his wand. He couldn't bear the darkness anymore, even if it wasn't real.

It had sure felt real.

His knees stung from scuffing the ground. His feet hurt. He was cold and trembling violently. And the fear . . .

It was a physical thing. Something that made his chest hurt and his ribs tighten. His throat burn. His insides hammer and hammer and *scream* in protest.

He wrenched open the four-poster curtains, the light of his wand

gleaming off the wood. His heart was still racing.

And then another set of curtains opened and before he had time to think, Harry was shining his wand straight in Riddle's face.

They stared at each other.

'You—you—did I wake you?' Harry said finally.

He moved his wand so it shone on the floor instead, and just made out the movement of him shaking his head.

'Then why—'

'You dreamed that too?' Riddle interrupted. His voice was devoid of any emotion.

Harry thought of all the things he could say but in the end it didn't really matter. 'Yes.'

For one horrible moment, Riddle didn't say anything at all. 'Very well. Ridiculous, wasn't it?' His voice didn't change.

Harry wished more than anything to see his face. 'Yeh. So stupid. I mean, muggles and London. With their *war.'*

There was a noise from one of the other beds — a loud snore. It made Riddle stiffen and Harry—whose heart hadn't calmed down—jump.

'I'm leaving,' Riddle said, walking past Harry and towards the door, 'and if you breathe a word of this to *anyone* —'

'No. I won't. But —' He stopped. 'I'm not going to sleep anymore. Not after that. I'm coming.'

He didn't want to lie alone in the dark with that noise going through his ears and the fear overtaking his mind.

For a second it was like Riddle would refuse. But he just walked on, out the door, without a word.

Bewildered, Harry followed.

The Common Room was cast in a dark blue gloom. The straight-back chairs looked eerie, the porthole windows like the eyes of a monster.

'We can't share dreams,' Riddle said. 'That shouldn't be *possible.'* He

reached one of the chairs, stopped and turned back around. Started to pace.

‘I know,’ Harry said, ‘we’ll get rid of it.’

Riddle’s eyes flashed dangerously. ‘And what plan do you have to do that?’

‘None so far.’

Harry briefly considered going back to bed and pretending this had never happened. But the thought of it was unpleasant.

Riddle was walking around the Common Room. ‘What you saw,’ he began, ‘means nothing. Dreams are exaggerated, they’re figments of the subconscious. They morph into things that aren’t real. Do you understand?’

Harry forgot how to speak. Riddle looked unlike anything he had seen before.

No longer so put together and immaculate, his hair was raked upwards from where he had ran his fingers. His feet were bare and he was dressed in nightclothes. And on his face—behind all the anger—was something vulnerable.

‘No.’ The words came out before he even registered them. ‘Because I know what you’re doing. You’re acting like it isn’t a big deal. Like it never affected you.’

Riddle made a disparaging noise. “And how would you know that?”

I can see it.

Because Riddle’s eyes were wild and his hands were shifting restlessly. Because he looked young and not as unbreakable as he always had before. Harry felt like he shouldn’t be seeing this, that this Riddle was carefully hidden away and not for anyone else. But he couldn’t look away.

‘Because I do it too.’

Riddle stopped walking abruptly.

‘You must have seen some of my dreams. The *cupboard.’* It almost made him laugh. ‘It wasn’t the most healthy childhood, you know.’

‘Was that before the Weasleys adopted you?’

Harry really didn’t like the thought of lying. Not when it was like this.

‘Yeah,’ he said, something lodging in his throat. ‘So I get it. I do.’

Riddle’s face was soft in the light. But when he spoke, his lips curled upwards. ‘I did see your pathetic childhood. Excuse me if I want to keep mine private.’ His nostrils flared. ‘Muggles. How *disgusting.’*

‘I won’t tell anyone,” Harry said. “Not that they would believe it.’

‘It’s not your business. You shouldn’t *see—’*

‘Well, too bad,’ Harry said, ‘because I just did.’

‘People don’t share dreams.’

“It wasn’t a laugh for me either,’ Harry said. ‘You think I want you seeing the cupboard and my girlfriend and my—my *godfather?’* His voice shook. ‘I don’t. But we don’t have a solution yet.’

Riddle rubbed his eyes. He seemed to catch himself for the first time and glanced down at his nightclothes and then back at Harry, eyes lingering on his face for too long.

‘I tried Dreamless Sleep Potion. The very first time I had your dream.’

‘And?’ Harry leaned forward.

‘It didn’t work.’

Riddle absently smoothed down his hair. ‘Tomorrow, you’re going to pretend this never happened.’ Though his voice brooked no arguments, he looked at Harry, waiting.

He slowly nodded. ‘Don’t we anyway? And —’

He stopped. Maybe it was the tiredness and the empty Common Room. Maybe it was the feeling of his heart ready to jump out of his chest or the echo in his ears. Or maybe it was the expression on Riddle’s face.

‘You don’t ever have to go back to London,’ Harry said. ’You’re a seventh-year now.’

Riddle gave him a curious look. ‘I haven’t gone back. Not since fifth-

year. Why *would* I?'

Harry shrugged. 'Well, you had no choice when you were younger, did you?'

'What you saw, Harry, was a *false alarm*. A routine. One of many.' His voice was bitter.

'Still. There was a war going on, and bombs, and —'

'We're not talking about this.'

Harry let the words die on his lips.

And you were a kid.

They sat there and neither of them spoke. Harry found it didn't matter. His chest seemed to tighten and loosen over and over again. His breathing began to regulate. And Riddle just sat there, lost in thought.

Everything was different in the light. It made him look human; unfamiliar and entirely different.

Slowly, the room brightened. Dawn crept in.

Chapter End Notes

> Short chapter, I know. But life's getting busy right now.
> As usual, thanks to everyone reading this. I'm so grateful. I know you still have questions but they'll be revealed soon. If you think Harry should be wary of Belinda, remember he hasn't actually any reason to, except a fuzzy head and some memory spots.
> Also, if you spot any mistakes, you're welcome to tell me. This chapter didn't get much editing, so I apologise.
> And, of course, feel free to tell me your thoughts.

In the Night-Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They never did talk about it the last day but Harry found it didn't matter. He didn't want to – not when there were so many things for him to question and doubt. Something seemed softer about Riddle now; a hint of the boy beneath everything else. Tiny and barely there, but visible nevertheless.

He thought that maybe he could deal with this. Because it was Riddle not Voldemort. It was *Riddle* who was connected to Harry, and it was bad but maybe it was bearable after all.

When morning came, he was barely aware of the tiredness. It felt almost surreal. As though his head was muddled, all this imaginary. It seemed more plausible that the alternative.

'If you tell anyone of this,' Riddle warned him, 'you're dead.'

But he didn't look intimidating, not then. Like Harry he seemed tired. Dark shadows lurked under his eyes and the threat was immediately ruined when he yawned.

Harry didn't bother retort. He settled with a roll of his eyes. 'Your muggle past isn't my big priority, you know,' he said. 'That's definitely sleep.'

'It's definitely *Herbology,'* Riddle said. 'Which starts in ten minutes.'

Harry immediately sat upright and stared at him. 'Ten minutes?' he repeated.

Riddle nodded. 'Nine now.'

Harry's heart gave a jump of surprise before he finally realised. 'No, it's not. There's no-one awake.'

Riddle smirked. 'Oh, silly me.'

Harry scowled. How had he fallen for *that?* 'You're *such* a prick.' He stifled another yawn.

‘Well, you’re the idiot who believed it.’

Riddle’s voice was warm.

For the first time in his life, things seemed to be going well. Riddle had become far more tolerable, and though Harry still kept one eye open, he felt like this truce could actually work. He could manage this mind connection, manage it all, until they went back to the future. And all of this would be like a distant memory.

It wasn’t like they were actually friends or anything. Nothing so dramatic. And even if he didn’t tell any of this to Ron and Hermione, it wasn’t for a *reason*. Things had settled between the three of them, the tension and the disapproval thawing away. It was so nice he only wanted to keep the peace, however long it lasted.

His scar didn’t bother him all day.

'Well done, Harry,' Dumbledore said that evening. There were in his office and the Pensieve lay on the table between them, glowing faintly. 'You kept me from your thoughts.'

'I did?'

But he had. Somehow, the calm feeling had persisted, and Harry's thoughts stayed carefully locked away.

'You didn't expel me from your mind,' Dumbledore said, ‘but I couldn't access anything. And you stayed calm. Remarkably so. It’s a solid start.'

Harry grinned. 'That's good, right? If I can keep you out, I can keep everyone out.'

'Maybe,' Dumbledore agreed, ‘it's remarkable progress. Do we have any reason to celebrate your new clear head?'

Harry hesitated. 'Not really,' he said slowly. 'I just feel —fine. Like everything will be fine.'

'Then keep it up,' Dumbledore said, ‘and these lessons won't be necessary.'

He left the office in high spirits.

It was working. Occlumency was actually—finally—working. And if he didn't want to think too closely on why everything seemed so much easier, that was nobody's business.

He was in such a good mood he barely noticed Rosier glaring at him throughout dinner and Abraxas tentatively trying to keep peace.

'So, Potter,' Rosier said. 'Are you finally going to become a proper member of the house?'

A few conversations around them stilled. Harry paused, his fork halfway to his mouth. 'What do you mean?'

'Are you going to join the Club? Change up a few of your views?'

Harry turned to Riddle, who seemed to have frozen in his seat. He looked back at Rosier. 'No,' he said, slowly and defiantly. 'I'm not joining your *club*.'

'Then'—Rosier's eyes slid meaningfully from Harry to Riddle and back again— 'why the sudden friendship?'

Harry stabbed his chicken with particular force. He bit back the '*we're not friends'* on the tip of his tongue. He didn't know why Rosier's words had such an effect on him. 'We're working things out. You know, it's called being mature. You should look it up sometime. Or are dictionaries too muggle?'

Rosier's hand tightened around his knife. He looked like he was contemplating climbing over the table and seeing just what muggle weapons could do. 'Well you see here, you little blood-traitor bastard —'

Riddle cleared his throat. 'Enough, Edwin. The matter is not your concern.'

Rosier shrank back. For a second, he looked unmistakably hurt. And Riddle's face couldn't have been colder. No-one said anything. Harry felt Rosier staring at him and knew he thought the whole situation was unfair.

'Slytherins do not pick fights with other Slytherins,' Riddle said, very slowly like he was speaking to a stupid child. 'Is that not something you understand?'

'No, m'lo—I mean *yes*, I do understand. I –' He shot Riddle a panicked glance.

'Good,' Riddle said, 'because you do not involve yourself in my matters. That would be *very* unwise.'

Rosier's plate rattled and he almost jumped from his seat to get away from it. 'I—I understand,' he muttered. 'Of course.'

The plate settled down. Silence descended on the table. Rosier didn't look at Harry again, only stared down at his plate, grabbing it with both hands in case it rose.

Harry spared a glance at Riddle from the corner of his eye. His feat of wandless magic had made the air chill and the mood darken. But Harry couldn't help feel grateful.

'Well,' Abraxas said, clearing his throat. The silence was evidently too much for him. 'Did anyone hear that Grindelwald was seen in England?'

The conversation started up again and turned lighter: classes, then professors, then Hogsmeade.

'I need to get a new Herbology textbook,' Tabitha Rowle, a girl in their year said. 'My other one got hit by a spell.'

'If you didn't practice them in the middle of the night it wouldn't happen,' Lucretia replied.

'I just want to go to Honeydukes,' was Abraxas' reasoning. 'And see the new Quidditch gear.'

Harry agreed. He wanted to go to Hogsmeade and see could he find anything that would help them get back to the future. A book, an object, a person —

Something.

'What about you, Belinda?' Lucretia said. 'Any big plans?'

Belinda barely looked up from her meal. 'If you must know,' she said, 'I'm meeting my fiancé.' The words were flat. Abraxas, who had been laughing, stopped at once.

Lucretia looked like she regretted her words. *'Oh.* That's—that's nice.'

'Nice,' Belinda repeated. Her lips curled into a strange smile. ‘I’m sure it will be.’

Harry awkwardly shuffled in his seat. Her voice was colder than even Riddle’s had been.

'He's older, isn't he?' said Avery. 'What's his name?'

Harry winced. He saw Abraxas shoot him a dirty look.

'Not your concern,' Belinda said. 'It's irrelevant.'

'Irrelevant? How on earth —'

'What part of not your concern isn't clear?'

Her tone was vicious. Avery shrank back, his eyes very wide. Then he shook himself. ‘*Whatever.’* He gave an embarrassed laugh and scoffed. 'Have fun.'

This time Riddle didn't say anything and the meal settled into silence once more. When he caught Harry's eye, he only shook his head, ever so slightly.

He wasn’t going to intervene. *Not for her.*

Throughout the rest of the meal, no-one spoke. Abraxas attempted to start the conversation again in vain; Harry played a staring contest with Riddle each time he looked near.

Rosier was stabbing his food very forcefully and Avery was muttered under his breath. Harry caught the word ‘*girls.’*

At that, Belinda clutched her fork so tightly Harry thought it would break. But none of them said anything, and at last, when the silence became stifling, Belinda got up and left.

Everyone watched until her blonde head disappeared from sight. After a minute, Abraxas shot Avery an angry look, pulled his chair out, and followed after her.

He didn’t see Ron and Hermione as much these days, what with the

different time-tables and houses. But when they did meet up—evenings in the library or after lessons in the empty classrooms—it always reassured Harry that he wasn't alone. They were here too, going through the same thing.

Well, not exactly. They didn't have Riddle or the rest of the Slytherins. But they were here and trying to get back.

'I'm starting to think it's hopeless,' Ron said one day. 'Dumbledore can't fix the time-turner and unless we do, we're stuck here.'

'Don't say that,' Hermione said sharply. Her voice was just loud enough that if Madam Pince were here she would give them her signature narrow stare.

'And why not? You're both thinking it. Just because you can never admit you don't know something —'

Hermione's nostrils flared. 'Because I don't want to *give up?'*

'Because you won't admit what's right in front of your eyes —'

'It's not me who needs to admit something, Ron,' she snapped. 'Maybe if you just pulled your head out of your arse, we wouldn't be having this problem.'

Harry could guess what this was about. If their heated glares meant anything, it wasn't about the time-turner at all and never had been.

'I'm going to talk to Professor Dumbledore,' Hermione finally said. Ron was gaping at her, and Harry didn't blame him because Hermione didn't use words like *arse*. But when he didn't speak, she shook her head. 'You know—actually *do* something.' Then she stalked away, hair bouncing behind.

Harry lowered his voice. 'Do I even want to ask?'

'She's so bloody — so bloody stubborn,' Ron muttered. 'Why does she make things so *complicated?'*

'Well—'

Harry had never been good at dealing with this sort of thing. In Sixth Year, when Ron was with Lavender, Harry had been like a ball they juggled between them, trying not to take a side.

'She's far more logical than me or you. What happened?'

What did you do?

'Corner happened. I thought—I thought we had something. They're practically dating now, do you know that?'

'They are*?'*

'You should see the way things are in the Common Room—all the flirting.' He shook his head. 'It would make you sick.'

'You and Lavender weren't too private. I think I've seen your tonsils by now.'

'That was different,' Ron said, his face red. 'I had no chance with Hermione back then. But I thought now, at least, we had something.'

Harry couldn't keep his face straight and Ron's expression turned betrayed. 'If you're going to laugh —'

'I'm not,' Harry said quickly. 'I just think you're being pretty thick. You've always had a chance with Hermione. Did we do a different sixth year or something? I remember *lots* of moping.'

'That was just you with my sister,' Ron said, beginning to smile when Harry scowled. 'She was writing to *Krum.* And then bloody Cormac McLaggen.'

'To make you jealous. She's probably waiting for you to do something. You know, like *ask her out* —'

'It's different now. She could have anyone. Corner. She'll say *no.'*

'I'm sure she doesn't fancy him.' It didn't sound like Hermione at all. 'Just tell her, Ron.'

And end this god-awful conversation.

'I'd embarrass myself. Ruin everything, and then what?'

'No, you wouldn't —'

'Have you seen Corner?' He interrupted. 'Handsome bloke, isn't he? And he's smart. Like her. They have discussions about *Gamp's Laws* and all that crap.'

'Hermione does like Gamp's Laws,' Harry agreed. 'And Goblin Rebellions and Arithmancy. But she also likes *you*.'

'But —'

'You think I don't know her? Our best friend? Or see all your disgusting interactions? The hand-holding? The secret conversations?'

Ron actually looked guilty. ‘You know we don’t mean to do that—'

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘I know. And when we go back to the future, Corner will just be someone’s grandfather. She’s *definitely* not into that.’

‘Krum was older,’ was Ron’s response. They looked at each other and burst into laughter. It sounded out of place in the library hush but neither of them cared.

‘Give up,’ Harry finally managed. ‘That’s just stupid.’

‘Then what do I do?’

‘Tell her. It’s hardly rocket science.’

‘Dad’s mentioned that before,’ Ron said. ‘But I don’t think he understood it.’

From the man who had asked him to explain the postal service, Harry didn’t doubt it. ‘Yeh, neither does Dudley. He’s about as smart as Grawp though.’

Ron laughed. The red patches on his face had faded: only the tips of his ears were left now. He leaned on the chair, lifting the legs from the ground. ‘Thanks then. If you’re sure — ‘

Harry closed his eyes. ‘I will hex you,’ he warned.

'Alright! I get it. Sorry. Emotional range of a teaspoon, remember?’

‘I think that’s too generous,’ Harry said darkly.

‘Tell me how you really feel then, mate.’ He got to his feet. ‘Alright, I’ll ask her out.’

‘Thank god.’

‘And I’ll tell you immediately what happens —'

‘Please don’t.’

‘I know you don’t like to be spared the details — ‘

‘I really hate you.’

‘Great! I’m gonna go. Before I change my mind again.’ He hesitated on the spot, looking towards the library doors.

‘Be a good friend and obliviate this conversation from my mind, would you?’ Harry said.

‘If I suffered through you and Ginny, it’s only fair.’

Yeah right.

But as Ron set off after Hermione, with a spring in his step and a very nerdy thumbs-up, Harry was happy. Happy for his two stupid, wonderful friends. They deserved to be together.

Even if, as much as he tried to ignore it, he couldn’t help wonder if he would be left behind.

He didn’t dream of the orphanage again, or the sirens in the night, but when he did sleep, it was poorly. He had always been a light sleeper but now every sound, every movement, would jolt him awake.

One of those nights—with his mind resisting the need to relax—he gave up and stared at the ceiling. All the things he could ignore during the day came to him with a painful awareness.

What are you going to do, Harry, his mind whispered. *What if you’re stuck here forever?*

A fear he wanted to ignore. What if Ron and Hermione didn’t need him anymore? What if he had ruined their lives?

What if Riddle found out about the future and how they had discovered his Horcruxes?

What if, what if, what *if*.

The bed made a loud creak as he got up. He lit his wand and let it illuminate his alarm clock, showing the middle of the night.

Everything was silent and when he spoke his voice seemed to echo, over and over.

'Riddle? You awake?'

Riddle was probably asleep. He wasn't haunted by his dreams like Harry was. He wasn't affected by this—whatever it was. He was fine. It was only Harry: unable to escape, unable to be normal, even fifty years into the past.

The dormitory was still for one long moment. Then Riddle's curtains opened and he stepped out, alert and wide-awake and unbothered. Harry almost sagged in relief.

'This is becoming a bit of a problem,' Riddle said.

Harry nodded, but his mind had quietened, his thoughts finally disappearing. 'I thought you were asleep,' he said.

'Sleep? Don't be ridiculous.'

'Even you have to sleep,' Harry said and paused. 'I hope.' He wouldn't be surprised if after making horcruxes, Riddle's next step was to get rid of his human necessities.

'Well, Harry, whatever is troubling you seems to affect me as well. So unless you want me to *permanently* put you to sleep, I really wouldn't worry about me.'

'That's called murder.'

'So don't tempt me.'

Harry shook his head. He wasn't being serious—at least, he thought not. He could never be sure with Riddle. 'If you sleep and I stay awake — 'he said slowly. 'Would that work?'

'It might. But I'm not tired. Are you?'

Harry shook his head. Oddly enough, he wasn't. 'I won't kill you in your sleep,' he said. 'If that's what you're afraid of.'

'Like you could,' Riddle said, and before Harry could protest continued. 'Let's go for a walk.'

The words died on Harry's tongue. He looked at Riddle—looked for some hidden meaning but found nothing. And if a tiny traitorous

voice said it was because he didn't *want* to find anything, he ignored it. Riddle was just standing there, expectant, and the only thing Harry could think to do was agree.

'Where?'

'Wherever the night takes us. Bring your cloak.'

Harry's possessions were already flung about. The digging through his trunk only made this worse. When he did find it, Riddle was at the dormitory door.

'I hope this isn't some trick to get me lost in the castle,' Harry said, 'because it won't work.'

I know the castle far better than you think.

'So suspicious,' Riddle said. 'But I simply fancy a walk. To clear my head.'

Harry found it hard to match Riddle's strides. His footsteps seemed very loud as they left the Common Room—unlike Riddle, who was practically silent.

'Do you silence your feet?' Harry asked, after a few moments.

Riddle smirked. 'No, Harry. I just have this little thing —it's called grace.'

'No, you definitely practice.'

'Talent doesn't require practice. You're born with it—or you're not.'

He slowed down. 'And unfortunately for some of us — 'His smile was slow and sly and it made Harry's brain freeze. 'You're *not*.'

It took a moment for the words to catch on. 'You wouldn't know talent if it slapped you in the face,' Harry said.

'How eloquent.'

But when he walked now, he matched Harry's pace perfectly.

'Where are we going then?' Harry said. They reached the Entrance Hall and Riddle glanced around.

'Anywhere. I'm Head Boy.'

‘That means you do rounds. On a schedule. You still have a curfew.'

‘It means I can come up with any reason for leaving the Common Room. *Easily.*’

That made Harry’s insides twist up. The way he said it alluded all sorts of sinister ideas. Not noticing Harry’s conflicting thoughts, Riddle went to the Front Doors and cast a spell. They creaked open.

‘You know what, I think I might go back to bed.’ Harry looked doubtfully outside.

'Really?' Riddle’s face was cast in the shadows, his body one long, black shape. The torchlight made his eyes glow and Harry couldn't say no, not if he really wanted to. 'Fine, let's enjoy some— October frost.'

They stepped outside. The cold wind slapped against Harry’s face and crept under his robes. The moonlight was unnaturally bright, lighting up the stretches of grass and illuminating the pathways in rippling silver.

'Full moon,' Harry said and immediately thought of Remus.

Riddle sniffed. 'Stay away from the Forest then. The wards don't always work.'

'What wards?' Harry asked, even though he knew the werewolf thing was just a rumour.

Riddle, who had begun to walk, waved his hand. 'Do you really think anything can just wander in here?' He didn't wait for an answer. 'There are charms around the castle’s perimeter. Runes under the ground, which date back centuries. They don’t affect humans but if creatures come too close, they are bewitched to turn back around.’

He looked at him. ‘That’s also why there is a lot of resentment with the centaurs and other magical beings.’

'That makes sense,' Harry agreed. He looked at the forest with a newfound wonder. ‘But there aren’t werewolves. They aren’t wild. Wouldn’t they just be humans wandering around, expect for one day a month?’

He knew not every werewolf was like Remus but they weren’t savages.

'No,' Riddle said. 'Werewolves are pack animals.' He noticed the way

Harry's face tightened at the word animal. 'Pack *creatures. Magical, pack beings.* They don't work well alone. The Headmaster wouldn't bring them here but that's why you don't see many werewolves in society. They stay as a group, which makes things more difficult and unaccepted. Therefore, they're shunned.'

'I knew a werewolf. He was just a normal person.'

'You knew a *werewolf?*'

'He was just a person.'

Riddle didn't say anything for a moment. 'Most aren't. Not people and definitely not normal ones. They have all the characteristics of a human and then more. But they're wild and animalistic. Feral.'

'They *are* humans. The Wizarding World is just so prejudiced.'

Riddle looked like he was ready to disagree and changed his mind. 'You can be fond of a werewolf and accept it's not a human. Admit it's a monster.'

'You're a monster.'

Riddle bared his teeth and made the most ridiculous growling noise Harry had ever heard. It made him laugh unexpectedly, and his tension melt away into disbelief.

Riddle watched and when Harry stopped laughing, shook his head and said, 'finished now?'

'Maybe.' He tried to fight his upturning lips. 'As long as you *never* do that again.'

He thought of the Forest and the assortment of creatures that were there during his time: Grawp, the Acromantula colony, the thestrals . . .

'I wonder what else is in there.'

'A lot. Werewolves aren't the only things that come out on a full moon. I would go in, but you might lose a limb or two.'

'No thanks.' Harry looked him up and down. 'I don't think you could handle it.'

Riddle's eyes immediately narrowed. *'I* couldn't handle it?'

He looked like he had never been so insulted in his life and Harry hid his smile. 'Not with those robes. They would get caught on a tree or a bush. Or you would trip over a root. What would you do then? And your poor *hair* —'

Riddle's annoyance slipped away. Something gleamed in his eye. 'You aren't one to make fun of hair, Harry.' He reached up a hand to touch Harry's, who froze. He could still feel his hand after he pulled away.

'Potter hair,' Harry said, stuttering slightly. It must have been the surprise. 'It doesn't stay flat.'

'What a shame.' But Riddle didn't look like it was a shame at all. 'How *difficult.'*

'Ok, Mr. Perfect, leave me and my hair alone. I don't put hours of effort into mine.'

Riddle ignored the jab. 'Mr. Perfect? I am, aren't I?'

'If you call insufferable, evil maniacs perfect.'

Riddle grinned. 'That's my definition, yes.' His voice caught in the wind and blew away. Harry could feel the warmth radiating from him against the cold, cold air.

'Yeah, yeah,' he said. 'Whatever helps you sleep at night.'

He hadn't realised what he said until Riddle started laughing. Laughter, real and genuine, and it made Harry laugh too, at the ridiculousness of it all, glancing up into the star-strewn sky.

Maybe it was the tiredness, maybe it had done something to Harry's brain. Or maybe he was too reckless, too impulsive, because how else could he be here?

He hadn't realised where they were until they were at the edge of the Lake. The Quidditch Pitch was swallowed by the night and the lights from the castle glittered orange off the water's surface.

'Common Room's under there,' Harry said, pointing a finger into its murky depths. He had never thought that before. Not even during the Second Task. 'The castle's so *big.'*

'And no-one has ever gotten completely lost,' Riddle said.

Harry looked up from the Lake. 'What do you mean? I've gotten lost

loads of times.'

'No you haven't. Not really. In a castle that big — that changes every day — you think someone would end up trapped in a tower or stuck in the dungeons for a week. But it's never happened.'

'The Portraits,' Harry said, then trailed off. There were many parts of the castle that were completely empty.

'Magic,' Riddle said. 'The stairways always change, the corridors shift. No matter what, everyone ends up where they are meant to be. Isn't it fascinating?'

'It's cool,' Harry agreed. 'I'd like to explore the whole castle.' He almost mentioned the Marauder's Map and stopped himself.

'I have,' Riddle said immediately.

Harry gave him a sceptic look. 'No way. Not even Dumbledore has. There are rooms that only exist in certain situations. Or if you stand on a random step with your *left foot* —'

'Don't compare me to Dumbledore.' His nose wrinkled.

*'O*r if you sing a song on a particular Wednesday,' Harry continued. 'Or touch a certain brick on a wall —'

'If I figure out the magic the Founders placed on the castle, I would know everything about it. Imagine the *knowledge*.' His face lit up at that, changing entirely. And Harry had never seen someone so enthralled by Hogwarts before, apart from himself.

'Are you sure you aren't a Ravenclaw?'

'How dare you,' Riddle said. 'But it is better than the alternatives. I have never seen anything stupider than Gryffindor.'

'Gryffindor's great,' Harry said, knowing he was trying to get a rise out of him and unable to stop himself. 'Even the Sorting Hat says it.'

'You're a Slytherin.'

'Trust me, I know.' He shuddered. 'Everyone is just so friendly.'

'They have their uses,' Riddle said.

'Yeh, for you. Do you know Abraxas asked me do muggles wear

clothes yesterday?'

Riddle' face twisted at the mention of muggles. 'His ignorance is a blessing.'

Harry didn't want to argue with him. He knew Riddle anticipated it, and he frowned when it didn't come.

'It's very easy to remember why we shouldn't get along,' Harry said.

But they did, at least then.

The moon in the sky had shifted and it shone on Riddle's face, which was flushed from the night air. It made his eyes look very bright.

They *shouldn't* get along.

It was temporary, after all. All going to blow up in Harry's face. But he couldn't do anything about it then. Stupid, certainly: he was choosing to ignore what Riddle was, just as Hermione had warned.

But right then, his tidy hair dishevelled from the wind, Riddle didn't seem too bad. Tolerable even. And Harry didn't have it in him to deny it anymore.

Chapter End Notes

> Sorry for the slow updates! I'm super busy right now and I don't really like this one. There are two chapters left in part two and this is pretty much the end of the fluff. For a few chapters anyway. Anyway, brace yourselves for the things that are about to unfold soon. And thanks for your patience ❤

A Ghostly Encounter

With the first Hogsmeade trip of the year drawing near, Harry wasn't the only person in a good mood. The eager attitudes were contagious, and it led to a great deal of chatter and laughter, so much that the professors struggled to keep the classes quiet.

'It's Seventh-Year,' Professor Beery barked. 'NEWTS will be there before you know it.' He sent them fertilising every plant in the greenhouse with dragon-dung, which was harder than it looked, especially when the plants protested by trying to bite.

But on Friday in Charms, Professor Flitwick let them cast whatever they wanted. He was also in a good mood about Hogsmeade and rewarded points for nice spellwork. Harry and Ron raced bits of paper around the room, and Harry transfigured his textbook into hoops so they could act out a Quidditch Match. This, Professor Flitwick thought, was greatly creative and he gave them ten points each. Things had thawed out between Ron and Hermione and instead of disapproving about the wasted paper, she smiled.

Harry didn't miss the looks shared between them. Ron turned pink at Hermione's approval and she coiled a strand of hair around her finger. Their hands were so close they were touching.

So when Hermione looked at him and cleared her throat for the sixth time, he knew what was coming,

'Ron and I - ' she glanced at him. 'We're going to try dating.' As she said this, she twisted the piece of her she was fiddling with, and it resembled a large knot.

Harry met her eye. 'Finally.'

She relaxed a bit. 'Are you sure? Because we don't want things to change. I don't want it to affect our friendship. Mine and Ron's, and with you. That's the *least* - '

'Hermione,' he said firmly and she shut up at once. 'I'm happy for you. And we'll manage. Don't we always?'

She blinked. 'I suppose we do. And you're right, of course. I'm sure you anticipated this —'

Harry gave her a look.

'Alright, it was obvious.'

They all laughed.

'We aren't going to leave you out, Harry,' Hermione said, finally meeting his eye. 'So don't push us away, ok?'

'I wouldn't do that,' he said.

Ron made a disbelieving noise and still Hermione looked at him, her voice stubborn now. 'Harry, we *love* you.'

He didn't know what to say. It was like something had lodged in his throat and made it impossible to speak. She *loved* him.

He only looked at her, and the conviction in her eyes, and felt overwhelmed. 'I —' he began, and his throat closed once more. 'I know that. I feel the same.'

It wasn't the same but he thought she understood. And Ron, who looked up from the desktop, said, 'I suppose you're an alright bloke. Have to like you after seven years, don't we?'

'Shut up, Ron,' Hermione said, but it relieved Harry's awkwardness and he laughed.

'Spare my innocent eyes at least,' he joked, which made Ron scoff something about *innocent*.

He looked at Hermione, who was still uncertain. 'I want you to be happy. You know that.'

'I do, I do — ' her voice caught. 'It's just here, with no Voldemort, everything is so normal. And it's nice. It makes you wonder what things could have been if none of this happened.'

'No Dark Lord reigns forever,' Harry said, thinking of something Professor Merrythought had told him. 'It will end. It has to, doesn't it?'

He wanted more than anything, for them to have a normal life. Because unlike him, they didn't *have* to do any of this.

'It will,' Ron said. 'We'll go back, get those horcruxes and get rid of the nutter.'

Harry nodded carefully.

But what about Riddle, he wondered. How would the future change when Harry went back and he suddenly remembered? What about all the Slytherins?

Hermione seemed to spot something on his face. ‘Let’s not discuss this now,’ she said. ‘Look, one of your Quidditch players has fallen.’

They glanced over. The enchantment had worn off and the paper fluttered feebly around, gaining no height.

‘That’s Harry,’ Ron said, pointing to the piece of paper—the Seeker—lying limp on the ground. ‘Must be a bad omen.’

‘Don’t be morbid,’ Hermione said.

But Harry laughed. ‘Anything to get the snitch, isn’t that what Oliver used to say?’

‘He made you play with a rogue bludger,’ Hermione pointed out.

‘Yeah.’ Harry smiled wistfully. ‘Yeah, he did.’

As much as he loved his two friends, Harry couldn’t think of anything worse than going with them to Hogsmeade while they danced around their new relationship.

He thought cleaning floors for Filch would be better. Or dusting all the blinds in Privet Drive and spending the day in Mrs. Figg’s stuffy, cabbage-smelling kitchen looking at polaroids of long-dead *fluffy* and *kitty*.

Because he loved them, really, but when they shared those private smiles, or Ron brushed an eyelash from Hermione’s cheek and she touched his shoulder, he felt out of place.

Separate. No longer a trio but a couple and Harry. It was stupid, he himself had said it. Things would change and they would deal with them as always. But now, just for now, he wanted to let them figure it out together.

‘Go and have a date,’ he said. ‘*Alone.’*

‘Well, what will you do?’ Ron said. ‘Wander around on your own?’

‘I’ll be fine. Abraxas —’

Ron pulled a face like he was constipated.

‘*Isn’t that bad.* Go and have fun. Go to Madam Puddifoot’s or something.’

‘No thanks.’ Hermione scrunched up her nose. `I know you’re joking but it’s open here. Founded in 1927.’

He didn’t ask why on earth she knew.

‘A classic then. You’ll have confetti in your tea and those fat dwarf babies floating around your head.’

‘Cherubs.’

‘Exactly. And we can meet up for a butterbeer.’

‘It’s firewhiskey now,’ Ron said, ‘we’re of age.’

Harry shuddered. ‘I’ve gone off it. Badly.’

He could still taste it, sickly and sweet, if he thought hard enough. His whole head buzzing. And that paranoid feeling reared in his stomach, screaming *wrong, wrong wrong.*

Hermione’s smile began to slip and he quickly hurried on, ‘we’ll meet up. Don’t worry.’

‘Well, if you’re sure —’

He nodded. ‘I am. It’ll be fine.’

Harry didn't mind going to Hogsmeade with Abraxas. Not when his friend seemed so excited, his hands flailing as he prattled on. Not even when he started talking about Tom, and oh, how they would show Harry The Three Broomsticks, wouldn’t that be fun?

Riddle wasn't bad to talk to, really. They had settled into an easy routine of avoiding anything that would stir a fight. It wouldn't work forever. But right then it worked so well.

Riddle was interesting, and full of knowledge the same way Hermione was. He had unusual facts about almost everything and spoke in a way that didn't make it seem boring or overbearing. Harry saw why the Slytherins came to him. And some of the things he said were surprisingly funny, sharp and witty and laced with a slight bit of scorn. It was harmless, wasn't it? Getting along.

'We're going to buy new Quidditch gear, yeah?' Abraxas said, his voice high in excitement.

'*You* are,' Harry replied.

They were in the Common Room, along with the other Seventh Years, and Harry was being sucked into a conversation about Quidditch.

Abraxas blinked at him and Riddle lifted his head from where he was reading a book the size of *Hogwarts: A History*. 'Haven't you had the luxury of Abraxas' father's vault yet?' he said.

'That's weird, so no.'

'Oh, come on, Harry,' Abraxas said. 'If there's one thing the Malfoys can do, it's provide money for Quidditch. Especially for someone on the team.'

Harry had a vision of second-year when Lucius Malfoy bought the entire team Nimbus 2001's and shuddered. 'Definitely not.'

Harry's mind wandered as Abraxas spoke and he noticed the far-away look on Belinda's face. She was nodding her head as he babbled, her eyes distant.

Abraxas also noticed and shut up at once. 'Belinda? Are you ok?'

He touched her arm and she jumped, ripping his fingers off. 'Merlin, *what,* Abraxas?'

'Nothing. I was only wondering are you ok.'

He gave her a look, private and meaningful and revealing absolutely nothing to Harry.

'Everything's fine,' she said. 'It's not that.'

Harry watched, bewildered. He had never seen Abraxas so upset or at a loss for words.

‘I was thinking,’ she said shortly. Then she blinked and those pale eyes were staring right at Harry. ‘Are you excited for Hogsmeade?’

‘What?’ Caught off-guard, he stared at her.

‘You haven’t been before, have you?’

‘No.’

‘We’ll show you around, don’t worry. Though if you settle in like you did here it wont be a problem.’

Harry didn’t know what to say. She put him at a loss for words and he wasn’t sure why. ‘Yeh, it should be fun.’

He winced. *Fun.*

‘For some, maybe. ‘Her voice was so quiet only he and Abraxas heard. Abraxas reached for her again and she stood up, leaving his arm frozen in mid-air.

‘I’m going to arrange my outfit,’ she said, voice sweet and artificial. There was a mocking edge to it, like she had a private joke none of them knew. ‘Who thinks red?’

But she didn’t wait for an answer. She went up the staircase and disappeared.

Harry had a lesson with Dumbledore that evening and he reluctantly decided to go. He found it hard to meet his eye these days and wanted to dump his memories of Riddle into the swirling depths of the Pensieve. He knew if Dumbledore found out Harry’s Occlumency had improved the same time his relationship with Riddle had, he would be concerned. It concerned *Harry*.

As he went up the staircases, he put it to the back of his mind. If the Dumbledore of the future hadn’t understood Harry and Voldemort’s connection (or hadn’t bothered to explain it), why would it be different here?

He reached the Third Floor and a group of younger Gryffindors stopped their talking and giggled. He didn't know what they could be saying: he wasn't the Boy-Who-Lived or the talk of the Daily Prophet anymore. He continued down the hall and stilled.

That's when he spotted them. Or more specifically, *him.*Because Harry didn't notice the ghost, not at first. He only saw Riddle, standing in front of the stained-glass window. It took a second to notice he was talking to a ghost.

Harry knew not to make his presence known. Some instinct kept him rooted in place. Riddle hadn't spotted him. He was giving the ghost his full attention. His head shook, she was saying something and he leaned forward to listen . . .

Harry held his breath as he moved closer. Neither looked up and when he made out what they were saying he ducked behind a suit of armour. His invisibility cloak would come in handy now. He had seen it that morning, right at the top of his trunk.

With the suit of armour, his view of Riddle was obscured. But the ghost—a young woman with long hair—was in plain view. Harry recognised her up close. He had passed her many times in the corridors. She had a haughty look about her that was now absent.

He racked his brain. She floated around with Nearly Headless Nick. And he saw her during feasts sometimes. A house ghost, wasn't she?

The Grey Lady.

'You aren't the first student to ask me this, Tom, and you won't be the last.'

Harry craned his ears.

'But, Helena—'

His stomach turned.

'I understand where you're coming from. We all do things we regret. My own mother —' Riddle's voice shook and he cleared his throat — 'abandoned me when I was a baby.'

'You?' The ghost—Helena—raised her eyebrows.

'I was angry. I hope you can understand. I've never told anyone this

either.' His voice lowered. 'Sometimes our mothers let us down, don't they?'

'Yes. I suppose they do.'

She must have seen something on Riddle's face for she continued, 'It's not a nice story. Are you sure you want to hear?'

'I want you to trust me.'

Harry imagined the earnest expression on his face and he didn't know if he wanted to laugh or throw up.

'And if you do tell, it will stay just between us. I'll understand.'

'Well, I suppose I —' she took a deep breath. 'It wasn't easy being the daughter of Rowena Ravenclaw.'

Harry listened from where he stood. As Helena began her story she couldn't seem to stop. It spilled out in a rush. Every time she caught her breath and began to look uncertain, Riddle said something reassuring.

'It's not your fault.' His voice was soft. 'Sometimes I feel I need to prove myself as well.'

'You're Head Boy. The best in Hogwarts, they say. *Why?'*

His voice lowered like he was revealing a secret only for her. 'I'm a half-blood.'

Harry couldn't have moved if he wanted to. He knew Riddle was manipulative, could charm anyone he wanted. But he had never seen it in action before.

Helena's story began to piece together.

. . . stole her mother's diadem . . . the Lost Diadem of Ravenclaw . . . put it in a hollow tree in Albania . . .

`It's not your fault,' Riddle said soothingly. 'I promise.'

Something inside Harry twisted. It wasn't just the fact Riddle's nature was crystal clear. He had always known that, deep down. It was the Horcrux. The final one.

Months he had spent searching, months wondering what it was.

Ravenclaw's Diadem.

Riddle was planning another horcrux already, was going to steal it from Albania. Planning another murder . . .

He was going to split his soul again. *Kill* someone.

Harry moved from behind the suit of armour. He couldn't take his eyes off them and didn't care if Riddle saw; wanted him to.

There was a clunk as he knocked against another suit of armour. It gave a loud, indignant shout—*watch it, boy!* —and the talking stopped at once.

'What are you doing?' the Ghost of Ravenclaw demanded.

Riddle didn't look concerned. There was a lazy grin on his face which only grew.

He had got what he wanted, hadn't he? Another horcrux . . . already . . .

A part of Harry's brain said this was good news —he knew what they were looking for now—but it was so small it was overpowered. He knew Riddle was planning this but hadn't expected it so soon. It was like a slap in the face.

'Harry,' Riddle said. 'What brings you here?'

Harry ignored him, looking only at Helena Ravenclaw. He wanted to tell her, with his eyes, what she had done. What the simple story meant. What Riddle was going to do to her mother's lost diadem and the awful mistake she had made.

But none of this got through. She stared at him, haughty look back, and as flustered as a ghost could be. 'I'll see you around, Tom,' she said. 'Won't I?'

'Of course. I'd love to hear more from you.'

As she floated away, Harry tried to control his breathing. It was a mistake confronting Riddle, this entire thing was a mistake.

Horcrux, murder, horcrux.

Murder.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Riddle said, his satisfied expression disappearing.

`Why were you talking to that ghost?’ Harry said, managing to keep his voice level.

‘Her mother’s Rowena Ravenclaw. The stories she has about the castle are fascinating.’

Liar. Liar. Liar.

‘Harry . . . ’

He recoiled.

‘She was telling me about the Lost Diadem of Ravenclaw. Have you heard of it?’

‘I don’t care about the stupid diadem story,’ Harry said, ‘And neither do you. You’re manipulating her.’

His eyebrows rose. His voice wasn’t nice anymore. ‘And how’s that?’

‘Pretending you care. You want the Diadem for yourself.’

Riddle’s face stiffened. ‘And so what if I do, Harry? I thought you knew I was evil and despicable and — what’s that word you’re fond of? *Twisted.’*

Harry stared at him. He was right of course. ‘Yeah, I did.’

You killed your whole family. Myrtle.

‘I thought we could ignore it. But we’re too different. You’re— everything I dislike. No offence. And I don’t want —’

He stopped before he said something he shouldn’t. He was already treading a line. ‘I can’t pretend I’m ok with it. Not anymore. So stop trying to be my friend. Stop whatever game you’re playing. Just accept that *I don’t like you.’*

Riddle’s face darkened and an image of Voldemort flashed through Harry’s mind. He took a step back. The similarity was uncanny.

A reminder of what this was, why it was stupid, a bad idea, and he couldn’t forget—

Horcrux. Murder. Voldemort.

He left before either of them said anything else.

When Tom was a young boy, he realised feelings were pointless. Even his favourite feelings—amusement, satisfaction, pride—only distracted him. Took his mind away from the important things: his goals.

In the orphanage, the other children would snivel. Snivel and cry until their throats were raw and their noses blocked and their spirits crushed.

Whatever was the point? No matter how he felt, Tom ignored it. He would sit there, while they played some insolent muggle game, and daydream.

When little Molly Elliot tripped on the ground and scratched her knees, she burst into tears. The others crowded around, murmuring sympathy. *'I'm sorry. That must have hurt.*'

He wondered were they lying. There was no way they cared. Had any sort of sadness towards her.

It only made them weak.

'*Don't you feel bad, Tom?*' Fat, ugly Mrs. Cole asked. '*In any way?'*

An orphan's broken arm flashed through his mind and the sound it made when it popped from its socket. An experiment, it was, and instead of sad he felt proud and strong and the very opposite of bad.

'*No.*'

This was another thing that made him different. Above them. So when they would snivel and cry and let their hopes die, he would think about leaving this place. He was going to rule the world. And no-one would look down on him again.

Harry Potter left in a daze. His feet were tripping and he wasn't looking where he was going. He didn't turn around as Tom glared at him, the wheels turning in his mind.

There was no reason why Tom talking to a ghost would make him angry. No way he cared for the Diadem of Ravenclaw or if Tom coaxed The Grey Lady into telling him a story.

What had made him so mad?

Harry had those stupid ideas of right and wrong. Manipulation was bad. Murder was bad. It made Tom laugh. What did he think he was — some storybook prince who would save the world?

Things weren't that simple.

As Tom went back to the Common Room, his mind raced. Who did he think he was? *No-one* spoke to him in that way.

Tom could admit Harry was fascinating. His sheer anger would come in bursts. His eyes would blaze and his voice would fill with venom. He was above the other Slytherins — something more than a cowardly sheep.

And Tom liked to make him tick. Liked to hear his responses. Wanted to make Harry like him. Enjoyed the inner conflict it caused.

He liked how Harry wasn't afraid. Liked how he didn't always have to be on best behaviour — be *Lord Voldemort* or *Head Boy Riddle*.

It took away Tom's boredom and restlessness.Satisfied an itch. Harry was new and different and exciting.

But as Harry walked off, he knew it didn't matter how fun it was.

You're everything I dislike.

He couldn't focus on his plans of becoming Lord Voldemort when Harry was around. He barely spent time with his Death-Eaters. Everything was just *Harry.*Harry and that link between them. The dreams and the twin-wands and the invisible ties he could nearly feel.

Harry was much too distracting. Secretive. He knew something and was practically in Dumbledore's pocket.

Stop trying to be my friend.

Because, after all, Harry was a threat. And if he wanted the fun to be over, wanted to end their truce, shouldn't Tom give him exactly what he wished for?

The dream-sharing was the worst of it. Tom didn't mind having Harry's dreams — he had found out an awful lot about him. There were all those gingers that looked like his friend, Ron Weasley. Hadn't he grown up with them?

And then visions from a younger boy of a cupboard. The hunger was so bad in those, the space so small, that he wondered how Harry was still insufferably good.

It was when Harry saw parts of Tom he hated. Things no-one should see, from when he was a scared, pathetic child. *Weak.* Parts of himself he had gotten rid of.

And Harry — suspicious, noble, friends with Dumbledore Harry—was able to see into Tom's mind. Into his dreams.

He needed to get rid of this link once and for all.

When he reached the Common Room, Harry was nowhere in sight. He went over to Rosier who sat alone, hunched over a Daily Prophet article. 'Stop slouching,' he said. 'What are you, a muggle?'

Rosier straightened so fast it was a wonder his back didn't break. 'Sorry, m'lord.' He looked at Tom, awestruck and afraid.

Tom smiled at him, which made Rosier sit even straighter.

'Thank you, Edwin. I need to borrow your wand.'

He faltered. 'My wand?'

It was the ultimate test of trust. A wand was a wizard's most intimate possession.

'Yes. Your wand. Unless you refuse? I can find someone else.'

'No—no—I'll do it.'

He took his wand from his robes and rubbed it against the fabric. Tom watched in amusement as sparks shot out the end.

'I knew I could trust you,' he murmured. The words tasted like oil in

his mouth.

His wand was cold. Elm wood and phoenix feathers. It's inclination to the Dark Arts suited Tom, even if it wasn't a perfect match. Rosier didn't ask why and Tom didn't tell him. He inspected it from all angles and found it satisfactory.

Harry didn't come to the Common Room after dinner with the others. It gave Tom time to plan. He was probably with Dumbledore, or with the two Gryffindors, telling them everything he knew.

The Portrait Hole opened the minute curfew begun. He looked up but it wasn't Harry. Belinda came it, her head down, and she froze when she spotted him.

'My lord,' she began slowly.

Tom hide his frown. It wasn't spoken with the usual respect. Then again, there was something odd about Belinda recently. Distant. Quiet. Ever since he had told her to watch Harry Potter she had been acting differently.

'You haven't seen Harry, have you, Belinda?'

She gave him a strange look. 'No, my lord. Not since earlier.'

He was still out then. Excellent.

'And your father –'

She stilled.

'Still pressing for the wedding?'

He gave her his best sympathetic look but if anything, she looked troubled.

'It's final now.' Her voice was devoid of any emotion. 'There's nothing you can do.'

Like you promised.

But she wasn't looking at him anymore. She had always been one of his most loyal. Full of ambition, burning with it. Ideas and dreams and wishes. Which he had promised her.

But he couldn't deal with her strange behaviour now. Whatever she

was keeping, whatever she was hiding, he *would* get it out of her. With her family's influence it was essential she stayed loyal.

'Goodnight, Belinda.'

She hurried off, twisting the ring on her finger.

He stood up. The Common Room was still. The snake on the mantelpiece raised its beady eyes to watch. He took Rosier's wand from his pocket and left.

Tom ran into Harry on the Ground Floor. He had charmed the paintings to stay asleep and had his wand ready to obliviate anyone he passed. But everything was silent and he met no-one.

Harry was coming down the marble staircase and into the entrance hall.

Sneaking back to the Common Room, Tom thought, and that intense anger filled him once again.

'Are you usually this lost when I'm not around?'

Harry jumped a foot in the air. His wand was out in a second and he took a step backwards. 'What do you want, Riddle?'

'I've thought about it,' he said. 'For a long time. And this connection is a problem.'

Before Harry answered, he cast a spell and sent him tripping to the floor. A second later, his wand sailed to Tom.

'What the fuck —'

'Language,' Tom said absently.

Harry seemed to physically shake with rage. He was on his feet at once. 'Is this because I said our *friendship* is off? Really?'

'It's because this connection is dangerous. I do not want my mind tied to someone else's.'

Harry laughed disbelievingly. ‘You’re scared,’ he said.

Tom’s fingers twitched at his wand.

‘You don’t like me having your dreams. Well, too bad because it’s not going away anytime soon. You’ll just have to deal with it.’

‘You’re forgetting one obvious solution,’ Tom said.

Harry stiffened, his eyes widening in realisation. But he still didn’t look scared. He stood there, his eyes blazing, without a wand. ‘Go on then,’ he said. ‘Give it your best.’

‘It’s a shame to do this, Harry. I quite like you.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘No, really. You’re the most interesting thing around here for quite some time.’

‘Interesting. Because I don’t listen to the shit you spew? All this because of a crazy connection —’

He laughed again, loud and harsh and a bit mad. Tom waited until the echoes died away.

‘Your closeness with Dumbledore is unfortunate. How long until I'm called into his office for a chat?’

He pointed his wand at Harry’s head. ‘You oppose everything I do with your morals. The desire to be good. It was never going to work.’

Harry licked his lips. ‘You’re scared I’ll tell Dumbledore. I thought no one would believe me?’

‘But you know. You know too much.’

He entered his mind easily. Without a wand, it was more pitiful. Tom sank into it, letting every feeling wash over him. He dived through the memories, saw the day through Harry’s eyes. How he had waited behind the stature, heard them talking.

But when he went to press, the memory turned hot. Everything burnt, heat searing through him, driving him out.

‘I *said* to stop reading my mind.’

Tom's breathing was heavy. Being in Harry's mind made him dizzy; drunk and dazed.

He reached into his pocket and took out Rosier's wand. When Harry saw it, his mouth fell open.

'You know, it's a shame to have to do this,' Tom said.

'Oh, yeh? Well, my friends —'

'—Will have a lot of fun searching for proof. And even if they get it, it's *worth it.'*

He was a Seventh-Year now and he had achieved everything he wanted at Hogwarts. Letting Harry stay, letting him access Tom's mind, was worse than being expelled.

He waved the wand through the air and blue light spilled out of it. When it faded, a snake sat between them, larger than any muggle one. Its eyes locked on Harry.

'When we're done, I'll dump you in the forest,' Tom said, waiting for him to show some fear.

Beg. Beg for me, Harry. Plead for your life.

'You were the foolish student who wandered in. Defenceless. Who knows, by the time the creatures are done feeding, there might not be much left to find.'

Harry met his eye. Looked at the snake and back at Tom. Still, he didn't speak.

'*Kill him,*' Tom hissed.

The snake reared up. With no wand, the only thing Harry could do was back away. It advanced on him, gliding across the floor, and Harry backed away, not taking his eyes from it.

It made no difference. The snake rose into the air and lunged. Harry was sent toppling to the floor as it advanced on him, quick as a flash, massive body able to crush. It raised its head, fangs visible for a fraction of a second —

—and Tom watched carefully, felt nothing, nothing, nothing —

—It was going to bite him, it was venomous, oh god, oh fuck, he needed to

—

The snake's fangs were a millimetre from Harry's neck and Tom was waiting for the moment he would crumble; beg for mercy. The wand was still in his hand and he didn't know what to do with it. Didn't know why he still had it raised.

'Stop,' Harry yelled. The snake froze. Tom froze.

Disbelief made him laugh. It was impossible. There was *no way* —

'You spoke Parseltongue,' Tom said. He sounded much calmer than he felt.

Harry shoved the snake off him with a massive heave and rose to his feet. His breathing was heavy. 'You were going to kill me — '

'There is no were.'

'You were going to have me eaten by a fucking snake!'

What did he want - remorse?

'How cruel of me,' Tom murmured. He grabbed Harry's chin, forcing him to look at him. 'How did you speak Parseltongue?'

Harry shoved his hands off, his eyes—green, bright green—blazing. 'It's part of our connection, Riddle. Haven't you figured it out?'

'You can't give someone a hereditary skill. I am a descendant of Salazar Slytherin and you are —'

'A half-blood, like you?' He didn't seem to care Tom had his wand. That Tom had the power here, not him. 'I know all about your mother. Your muggle father. They left you in an orphanage. Poor little Tom. You're not better than anyone else because you have some old Slytherin blood—'

'I am —'

'Lord Voldemort? That's what you want to be called, isn't it? Oh, Riddle.'

The way he said it was wrong. No-one should say Voldemort that way. Not the way they would say *Tom Riddle,* a dirty, muggle name.

He waved his wand and Harry stopped talking and started screaming.

It was lucky he had put silencing charms up; the whole castle would be awake otherwise.

'*Kill him, now*,' he said to the snake.

Harry stopped his screaming and gasped out: 'No, stop it. I'm a speaker.'

Tom shot another wave of pain at him, causing his face to contort, knees to buckle, whole body to twitch and tremble. But he didn't cry out again. And strangely, it didn't give Tom the satisfaction he thought it would.

'Parseltongue,' he murmured to himself, not taking his eyes from Harry. 'How long have you been able to speak it?'

He released the curse and Harry gasped. He stared at Tom, eyes full of revulsion, and took a step forward. His bottom lip had split from where he had clamped down on it and was stained red. Tom wondered what it would be like to touch it, feel the burst lip under his finger, trace it with his finger. His mouth.

He had done that. His own artwork.

'I've been able to speak Parseltongue all my life,' Harry said, unaware of Tom's gaze. 'You *wanker*.'

And then his fist came forward, straight into Tom's face. There was a crunch of his nose and his feet buckled underneath him. He grabbed Harry's robes to steady himself and Harry shoved, toppling them over. They both fell backwards, hitting the ground. At some point, Harry had wrenched his wand from Tom's fingers.

He had fallen on top of him. Painfully. Tom felt all his long, awkward limbs and the warmth of his body. His ragged breath. Their faces were almost touching. Harry's glasses were broken and his eyes were comically wide.

'Would you mind,' Tom said, gritting his teeth as blood flowed from his nose. 'Getting off me?'

The weight disappeared at once and Harry stumbled back.

'You fight like a muggle,' Tom said. When he stood his head spun.

'There's nothing wrong with muggles. And I got my wand back, didn't

I?'

'Oh? Ready to show off some third-year spells?'

'I don't know,' Harry said, 'ever heard of —*sectumsempra!'*

Tom deflected the light back at him and it seared a hole through the floor. He fired twice, nonverbally, and Harry dived out of the way. The curses found their next target: the snake. It went up in a flash of red light.

Harry knew Parseltongue.

Parseltongue.

The same as Tom.

He slowly lowered his wand, leaving only a shield. Harry was casting so intensely it buckled. Tom could feel his anger, almost feel his thoughts.

How, how, how —

How were they connected? How did he get rid of it?

He wanted it gone.

And then Harry stopped trying to break through Tom's shield and grabbed his head.

The pain — the pulsing searing pain. The shield fell away. Tom gasped under the weight of it. The anger was consuming him — his own anger, not Harry's. And Harry made a little whimpering noise, grabbing his head like he wanted to tear it off.

Tom stopped fighting it and the pain faded instantly.

Harry took his hands away from his forehead. His curls were standing up and the scar — jagged and spidery, like a bolt of lightning —was starkly visible.

'We're connected through that,' Tom said, unable to keep the dazed note from his voice. *He wanted to touch, to feel* — 'Your scar.'

Harry knew Parseltongue. When Tom got angry, Harry's head exploded in pain. They were connected through the *scar.*

‘I’ve had it forever,' Harry said.

‘But you haven’t known me forever.’

All thoughts of killing him disappeared there and then. The scar joined them. Made him *Tom’s*. What sort of magic was behind it?

‘Want to try and kill me again?’ Harry said. ‘See how it works out?’

Harry didn’t realise at all.

‘Too risky,’ Tom said. ‘This link is deeper than I suspected.’

‘Well fuck that. Because I don’t care about your *connection* bullshit anymore, Riddle. Do your worst.’

He stalked off.

Tom let him go. Foolish? Perhaps. But could he kill him even if he tried?

He thought of Harry’s breath on his face and the anger burning in his eyes. When he looked at Tom and only Tom.

Why kill him when he could simply *have* him?

Belinda Lestrange

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Harry left Riddle, his whole body was surging with adrenaline. His feet were unsteady, his arms trembled, his knuckles throbbed. None of it felt real.

He had just tried to kill him.

Even the words were difficult to understand. They swam around his head, over and over, mixing with the anger, the disbelief, the image of Riddle's dazed face.

Riddle had just tried to kill him.

Harry glanced at his knuckles, swollen and bruised, and felt a stab of pleasure. It served him right. He hoped his nose was broken, hoped when it healed it was out of shape, crooked, a permanent reminder for all to see.

He should have killed Riddle before all this happened, the day they travelled back in time. Before the stupid truce, the stupid mind games. Before Ron and Hermione could convince him to do nothing, before Riddle convinced him to be friendly.

How hadn't he expected this? It was *Tom Riddle.*

And he had forgotten. He had let himself forget. Never dreamed Riddle would try and kill him or go to such lengths to remove the connection he seemed so fascinated by.

Still seemed fascinated by.

Harry thought of the strange look on his face when he had stopped casting. He looked almost hungry. Like Harry was some new, shiny object he had discovered with unknown magical properties.

I quite like you.

Would he dig? Try and find out more and more?

You're the most interesting thing that's happened around here for quite

some time.

He was a monster. Any slivers of humanity he had didn't matter. So what if he could be angry or scared? Amused or interested?

So what if he only ever thought of himself?

Harry's mind steadied. His thoughts slowed down. He had forgotten; he had been blinded. But he knew what Riddle was like now. Remembered exactly why he should stay far away.

The disregard in his eyes and the cold, confident cadence of his voice. The way he *watched.* Like Harry was an exotic animal at a zoo. There to gawk at; find out about until his interest slipped away.

Harry shook his head. The portraits were frozen in place and watched him beneath glassy eyes. He could almost feel them protesting, urging him to undo the charm.

Riddle knew about the Parseltongue. It was only another thing for him to become suspicious over, another thing Harry had to avoid. Another, and another, and the list was building up and up ---

What was the point?

Red eyes. His head *exploding* in pain.

If Harry got his diary, got his ring . . .

He could kill him.

It was a dangerous thought. A dangerous thought that nagged at his mind and didn't want to leave. He *couldn't.* Not be a murderer. But what was the alternative?

His mouth tasted like bitterness. A voice that sounded like Hermione rattled in his head. Idiot, it said. Idiot, idiot, idiot.

He blocked it out. Blocked it all out. All he saw was Riddle's eyes, black in the light, and the blood from his nose.

He had just tried to kill him.

And that strange look on his face . . .

It didn't matter.

The thought of telling Ron and Hermione made his stomach turn. Because if that got out, it would open the entire can of worms. They would ask questions. Insist. And the whole thing—everything he hadn't mentioned, denied to himself and them—would come too.

Friendly. That's what they had been.

Harry had liked Riddle. He had thought, for a childish while, that things weren't too bad. Bearable. Enjoyable, even. Slytherin wasn't the worst, and somehow, Riddle had made it better.

And he didn't want to be reprimanded just then. Not when he knew himself. Knew it all, far more than they could, full of fresh anger and bruised knuckles, knew and yet still *wanted* –

It would never have worked out. It was better to ignore him now, ignore him until all this was over, and they were back in the future.

Because thinking about it made his head hurt. Hurt, like something was banging inside his skull, bringing fresh waves of anger. Hurt like when Voldemort was in one of his worse moods and his vision turned white and Death-Eaters began screaming.

No, he wouldn't tell Ron and Hermione any of this yet. It was better to let them go to Hogsmeade, be happy, and not dragged into Harry's problems. They seemed happy here, happier than ever before. They deserved a day to themselves.

Harry didn't have the heart to tell Abraxas he didn't want to go to Hogsmeade. Not when he was so excited to show him around.

'Dumbledore took me before,' Harry had pointed out but Abraxas rolled his eyes and said apparition points weren't the same thing.

And if he told Ron and Hermione he was no longer going they would think it was because of them. Cancel the date. And he would have to explain. Explain it all.

'Just no meeting up with Riddle,' Harry said, 'and I'll go.'

Abraxas' eager expression slipped. 'Why? Did you have a fight? You didn't say something, did you?'

‘What, like, *you’re a murderous psychopath and I don’t know how anyone likes you –’*

Abraxas’ face was stricken and Harry sighed. ‘No. Nothing like that.’

‘Then what?’

It was so absurd he laughed. ‘Trust me, you wouldn’t believe it if you heard.’

He gathered his wand and while at his bed, lifted his invisibility cloak and stowed it in his cloak. After last night, he wasn’t taking chances.

Abraxas was dressed for the weather in a coat that buttoned all the way up to his chin. Harry had to stifle his laughter, reminded of muggle royalty the Dursleys were so fond of.

‘The first place you need to see is Honeydukes,’ Abraxas began, as they left the common room. ‘The chocolate is good, though it doesn’t compare to the stuff grandfather brings from Germany.’

Harry made a noncommittal noise. He really was a pompous prat.

‘And then, of course, the history of the village. It was founded around the same time Hogwarts was built.’

The caretaker didn’t check for permission forms—it was one of the advantages of being a seventh-year—and they set off down the winding, leaf-strewn path, Abraxas lecturing Harry on wizarding history. The sunlight was weak and the breeze harsh: meeting Ron and Hermione at The Three Broomsticks was becoming more tantalizing.

‘Wizards were being persecuted by muggles. They lived alongside each other before, and it was becoming dangerous. Hogsmeade was one of the many wizarding villages founded during this time. For sanctuary, and of course, to allow bloodlines to flourish.’

He caught the look on Harry’s face and cleared his throat. ‘Anyway, we’re nearly there.’

Harry wanted to tell him about muggles. They may have been dirty and uneducated and dangerous back then but they weren’t now. But he knew he wouldn’t listen. A muggle, to Abraxas, was the same as an alien.

They reached the village a few moments later. Hogsmeade, as always,

was interesting, but Harry had to fake a lot of his wonder. There was only so many times he could make surprised noises at various shops, or look suitably awed by the thatched houses and cobbled streets. He couldn't stop looking around for Riddle, dreading the thought of running into him. The pain in his scar was building up, like a crescendo.

'Ok, so you don't like post offices,' Abraxas said, trailing off from one of his many speeches. 'Of course you don't. No-one does.'

'No,' Harry said quickly. 'I love them. All the – parchment. And owls.'

'Were you listening to anything I said?'

'Not right now,' Harry admitted. 'My head hurts.'

'Again? There's an apothecary around the corner. Let's go and buy some –'

'I'm really fine.' He wondered what Abraxas would say if he told him Riddle caused his scar to hurt. 'It's just a headache.'

But Abraxas still looked concerned, enough to drag Harry somewhere and have a healer cast spells. To distract him, Harry said the first thing that came to mind. 'Why do you like Riddle?'

Abraxas froze for a second. 'Why do I like him?' he repeated. 'For the same reasons you do. Or did. Or – whatever. He's very smart. And powerful. He runs Slytherin, he's the heir. And he's always been there for me. With my – stuff.'

'Yeah, he knows everyone's stuff,' Harry said.

'And he's in charge. Why wouldn't he?'

Of the Death Eaters.

Charming. Influential. *Caring.*

'Come on,' Harry said, catching the weary look on his friend's face, 'show me this Quidditch shop you keep talking about.'

It was better than Harry thought it would be. Abraxas' excitement was contagious and he got the owner to bring out yet to be released equipment which had never happened to Ron or Harry before. The shop was packed with students, and quaffles and snitches buzzed overhead. But at the same time, it was like being in an antique shop.

‘Just let me buy you a pair of gloves,’ Abraxas was saying. ‘You’re a seeker. What if the snitch slips away?’

‘Snitches don’t do that.’

Or even worse, Abraxas tried to buy him a broomstick. ‘You can’t use Orion’s forever.’

‘There are school ones,’ Harry said.

‘And we both know you may as well fly around on an enchanted branch.’ Suddenly he stopped, staring out the window.

Harry followed his gaze. ‘What?’

‘It’s Belinda.’

Harry couldn’t find her at first, not in the swarm of people. He saw her when the crowd moved, her head down, walking behind a large man.

‘Is that her – husband to be?’

‘Yes,’ Abraxas whispered.

He had to be at least forty. No, *fifty*. Tall and broad with long, straggly hair and a gaunt, waxy face. He looked like an Azkaban prisoner.

‘He’ so old,’ Harry said.

‘Creepy-looking,’ Abraxas agreed.

They couldn’t see Belinda’s face—it was obscured by her hair—but she looked very small in comparison to him. Like a child walking behind her father.

‘Let’s go rescue her,’ Abraxas said.

Harry barely had time to put down the practice snitch he was playing with before they were out of the shop.

‘How?’ he said, but Abraxas was already striding forward. Harry spotted Riddle—tall, purposeful, causing heads to turn—exiting a bookstore. He froze when he saw Harry, who immediately looked away.

‘Follow them,’ Abraxas said. ‘Say we need her for something. Get her

away from him.'

Harry pushed Riddle out of his mind. His stomach rolled. His whole body felt hot with hatred. 'Right. Belinda.'

Abraxas had doubled his pace, and Harry followed after him. They reached a quieter part of the town, near a long alleyway. There were no students around, only two elderly witches that didn't spare them a glance.

'Look—they're going in there.'

The man pulled open the door of a dark, dingy pub and Belinda followed behind him.

'You really think we should follow?' Harry said hesitantly. Everything about the situation made him uneasy.

'Yes, come on.' He pulled open the door and they stepped inside.

The first thing Harry noticed was the hush. Unlike a typical pub, there was no music playing. No laughter. About a dozen people sat around dark wooden tables. A piano sat near the empty bar, its keys coated in a thick layer of dust.

'Oh, he hates me,' Abraxas breathed, suddenly looking nervous. It was dark enough inside that they went unnoticed. 'I don't know about this anymore.'

Harry didn't have to ask who *he* was. 'You know him?'

'Yes, Arnoldo Flint.'

The name seemed familiar. Strangely so. Where had he heard it before?

'He runs Azkaban,' Harry said. 'She told me that.' That night at the Slug Club. He could remember the first half of it clearly. Only Belinda never said he was her betrothed.

'You –um—' Abraxas wiped his hands on his trousers. 'Would you do the speaking?'

Harry looked towards the table. A part of him wanted to say no. He wasn't friends with Belinda, not at all. She was so strange; managed to make him feel uneasy and he didn't know why. But then, could he really leave her?

To Harry, she looked very bored and not at all scared. Her face had that blank look, her eyes that flat, distant way they got. And the man stretched out his long, dirty hand, as if he was going to grab hers –

'Ok. Fine.'

As they reached the table, both occupants looked up. Belinda's face took on a pleased expression but Arnoldo's curled upwards.

'Abraxas. *Again,* we meet. This is becoming an . . . occurrence.' He had several teeth missing and the ones Harry could see were yellow.

Abraxas let out a nervous titter and took a step back. 'Yes, well – '

He looked meaningfully at Harry.

'I need to buy Lucretia a present,' Harry said, looking at Belinda and unable to believe the rubbish that was coming from his mouth. 'And you're the only one who knows what she likes.'

'We don't know girl shops,' Abraxas chimed in. 'It's Harry's first time in Hogsmeade.'

'And I don't want her to see. I distracted her but it's only a matter of time until she comes looking.' He broke off. Looked at the man seated beside Belinda, his hand holding not her hand but her arm. 'I want it to be a surprise but she's hard to choose for. I have no clue –'

'Hurry back,' Arnoldo said.

Harry blinked. He really hadn't thought that would work.

'We will,' Abraxas said immediately, 'thank you so much.'

'Not you.'

Belinda rose from her chair at the same time Abraxas made a surprised noise. 'W –what?'

'You and me need a chat, Abraxas. Don't think I don't know what you're doing. All these distractions. My patience is starting to wear away.' As Belinda stood, he reached a hand towards her robes, trailing it over them.

'He needs to come,' Harry said, looking Arnoldo straight in the eye.

'No, no, it's fine.' Abraxas sat down in Belinda's empty chair and

began to fidget. He didn't seem surprised by Arnoldo's display and Harry wondered just how close he and Belinda were. 'Choose well, will you, Harry?'

It sounded like a plea.

Then she hooked her arm into Harry's and tugged them out of the pub. It was only when they were in the bright outside light that he saw the smirk on her mouth.

'Disgusting bastard, isn't he?'

'What?'

'Vile. Truly. Can I not say that word?' Her grip on his arm tightened. Her other hand seemed to tug his coat. 'A little pureblood girl like me shouldn't be so vulgar.'

The mocking edge was back in her voice. She slid one of her hands inside his coat and Harry tried to shove her off without hurting her but couldn't. Her hand was still tight on his arm.

'Belinda,' he said, 'you can let go now.'

'I was hoping you would stage some heroics, Harry. I knew when you were with Abraxas it was bound to happen. Save me from my big, bad date. I just didn't think getting you alone would be so easy.'

This was wrong. He knew in a second that something wasn't right about her; that his instincts had always been correct. The moment he went to shove her away from him, her fingers dug into his arm. At the same time, the hand in his coat found his wand and retracted it.

'Give me my wand,' he said, and got a hold of her wrist. 'Belinda, what the hell –'

He lunged for it but she held it out of reach, letting go of his arm suddenly, and shoving him so he staggered back. 'Let's go down here and have a chat,' she said, pointing to the alleyway beside the pub. It was very narrow and ended in blackness.

'Let me think about it – *no way.*' He moved for her again but she kept a distance between them, her own wand in her hand. He was painfully aware that this was a street. Empty now, but for how long? And what would people think?

‘Fine then. You have two choices. We go down here and you do what I say, or I go back into that pub and tell everyone you’re a time-traveller. Wouldn’t that be fun?’

For a second, everything seemed to freeze. She knew. Belinda knew. And she no longer looked timid or helpless. No longer kind or helpful.

‘How did you –’

‘Find out?’

They went down the alleyway.

‘It’s because I’m a girl, isn’t it? You didn’t think I could do it.’

‘No,’ Harry said, his mind spinning. Never had he imagined this would happen. Someone would find out.

‘You were scared it would be Riddle. Is he really all you think about?’

‘How do you know about Riddle? What do you want?’

She hesitated. For the first time, her face was unsure. It cleared a moment later. ‘I want your invisibility cloak. No. I *need* it.’

His cloak? How did she know about that?

‘I don’t have it on me,’ he lied.

Her pale eyes looked unnerving in the dark. Harry was more aware than ever of the strange, intimidated feeling he got around her. Like she knew so much more than everyone else.

How was he going to get out of this? He didn’t want to hurt her –not until it was a last resort. Buy time then.

‘I know you have it on you. I checked your dorm before you left. Didn’t you see it, just waiting at the top of your trunk?’

It had been at the top of his trunk. At the top of his trunk and he hadn’t used it in so long. ‘Why didn’t you just take it then?’ he said.

‘Because I thought you would notice. It’s not safe in the castle. I thought you would tell someone and it would be linked back to me. Tell Dumbledore. Your pesky friends.’

‘But here's perfectly normal then?’

‘They won’t know it’s me. Because you’re not going to tell them.’

And Harry decided not to disagree, to let her talk. Let her talk and he could *think* —

‘How do you know about the time-travel?’

She laughed. Loud and genuine, and not the titter she always did. ‘You’ve been so obvious. You were too busy thinking of your future and your plans. Or Riddle. All it took was someone to look. He told to watch you. The very first night you arrived. And watch you I did.’

‘You saw my cloak that day in the Common Room,’ Harry said. The day he had listened into Riddle’s death-eater meeting, desperate for answers. His foot had creaked on the wood, and for just a second, she had turned around. Saw a glimpse of his shoes.

‘You’re an orphan. Apparently. You use school funds. So how on earth did you get something as rare as an invisibility cloak?’

He would wait until she was distracted. Could he grab his wand before she cast a spell?

‘I followed you. I listened. You talked about killing some Dark Lord. Are you an Auror?’ He saw the interest in her eyes.

‘Sorry to disappoint,’ he said. ‘But I really am Harry Potter. It’s not a lie.’

‘How disappointing,’ she said, eagerness seeming to dim. ‘I listened. I heard you talk to your friends. Granger’s loud, isn’t she? In the library, outside. Not even using silencing charms. And you know things about the castle. You fit in too easily. Your prejudice against Slytherin. And of course, Riddle.’

‘You can’t tell anyone,’ Harry said. ‘And not him. You don’t know what would happen. I’ll buy you a bloody invisibility cloak.’

She raised her eyebrows. ‘With what money? The cloak isn’t for me, Harry. Deathly Hallow or not, I don’t need it.’

He recoiled. ‘Deathly – what?’

‘Don’t play stupid. You shouldn’t be so careless with your stuff. I couldn’t steal it while in the castle. Not with everyone around. Dumbledore around. Your friends. It would be linked back to me. But

now, I think, would you even have noticed?'

'Of course I would have noticed,' he said. 'If it's not for you, who's it for then?'

She glanced down the empty alleyway and the endless stretch of dark. 'What do you know about the Lestranges? Anything?'

He didn't answer.

'We have always been followers of Grindelwald. Some of the best. My father's practically his closest confidant. And everyone knows Grindelwald's getting closer to Britain.'

'Searching for the Hallows,' Harry said. 'Well, too bad. It's mine.'

'I had to make sure it was what I thought it was. That you weren't lying to your friends.'

Her wand was pointed at his face and the only thing going through his mind was the utter madness of the whole thing.

'The Slug Club,' he said immediately, unable to keep the revulsion from his voice. 'What did you do to me?' He knew he hadn't gotten drunk; knew something had been wrong.

'Nothing dangerous.' Her face was fierce. 'You think I wanted to? We were having a nice night. I just had to make sure you had it.' She licked her lips. 'Did no-one tell you to watch your drink?'

And then she laughed. 'Only girls get told that, right? Poor little girls being slipped love-potions. You never had to deal with that. I didn't hurt you. I only checked where you kept the cloak. So give it to me, Harry, and all this can be forgotten.'

'I guess you should have stolen it then,' he said. 'Because I'm not giving my cloak to Grindelwald. I don't know why you even want him to have it –'

'Be stubborn then.' She whispered a spell and it was wrenched from Harry's pocket, flew towards her —

And stopped, hovering in mid-air, and shot back towards him. They both lunged at the same time.

'You don't know how dangerous giving this to Grindelwald is,' Harry said.

‘Do you know what happens if I don’t?’

While she grabbed at the cloak, Harry tried to prise his wand from her hand.

‘I promised him. And he promised me. Think of what he would do for me. Anything.’ She flickered her wand and his hand grabbing the wand was wrenched away.

‘I know – you don’t want to marry him,’ Harry said. ‘Is that what Grindelwald promised you? Protection?’ And in a crazy way, he could see it. Grindelwald in her family house, around a table. Hearing his plans. Belinda talking to Grindelwald in private. Promising him the cloak he sought, in return for freedom.

‘I’d be important,’ she said. Muttering another spell, a sharp stab of pain went up Harry’s hand. His grip immediately slacked and she took the moment to grab the cloak. ‘Finally, I’d have some control. I wouldn’t be staying home and feeding kids.’ Her nose curled up. ‘I don’t fucking want kids. Or become anyone’s wife. You asked me, at Slughorn’s party, if I wanted to work in the ministry. As if *that* could happen.’

‘There are other ways to get away from your family. You don’t need Grindelwald. I don’t know if anyone told you, but you can’t trust Dark Lords.’ And he took her moment of hesitation, to knock his wand from her hand. ‘Dumbledore defeats Grindelwald next year. Your plan? It’s all for nothing.’

Her face went through several emotions at once: disbelief, shock, hurt. Then it hardened. ‘I need Grindelwald, Harry. I *need* your stupid cloak. It isn’t like you do anything with it.’

‘You’re being ridiculous. What about going to someone else –’

‘Riddle promised me power, And what did he do? *Nothing.* I can’t just run away. They’ll make my sister marry him. Punish her.’

Her wand was very, very close to his head. Her face had darkened. ‘I thought we could cooperate. But instead you’re going to have to forget.’

Time. He needed to buy time.

‘What about Abraxas?’ he said. ‘Is he involved in this?’

‘Abraxas does not have the nerve,’ she said. Her voice rose. ‘He’s all talk and no action. He’s scared of Arnoldo, did you see that? Terrified.’

He saw her lips move as she cast a spell—saw her eyes widen—and a light began to shine from the tip of her wand. He tried to move back but there was nowhere to go. The brick was against his back, his wand was metres away . . .

And then she flew backwards in the air. As she hit the opposite wall, he let out a gasp of air. There was a horrible noise as she crumpled to the floor and lay there, unmoving. He stared.

And then he spun around. What he thought had been accidental magic, was not at all. Riddle stood in the alleyway, his shadow a long, dark silhouette. ‘She’s been acting oddly all week,’ he said.

‘So you followed her?’

Riddle didn’t answer for a second. ‘No,’ he finally said. ‘I felt it. That you were in trouble.’

Harry could do nothing more than stare. He was too horrified to even think, to let the logical part of his brain act. ‘What did you hear? What she said?’

‘This cloak,’ Riddle reached down and tugged it out of her hand, ‘is what Grindelwald wants. An invisibility cloak.’ He inspected it for a moment then tossed it to Harry. ‘She’s very power-hungry. And miserable.’

His lips curled upwards. ‘What does Grindelwald want with an invisibility cloak?’

Harry didn’t answer. His feeling of horror was starting to grow. ‘Is she dead?’ he said, and unable to wait for an answer rushed forward, ignoring his wand lying on the ground.

Please don’t let her be dead.

The red blood around her head contrasted starkly with her white hair. And there was so much of it. He grabbed one of her wrists and pressed his fingers to it.

‘No.’ The relief was staggering. ‘She’s alive.’ He grabbed his wand from where it lay beside her. Gaped down at her, his heart thudding.

‘Oh,’ Riddle said and shrugged. ‘Perhaps it would be better if she was?’

Harry barely glanced at him. ‘Don’t,’ he said. ‘No way.’

‘I did this for *you*.’

He couldn’t wrap his head around that. Not with Riddle standing there, gazing down at Belinda with disinterest. Calm. Unbothered.

‘She’s not Myrtle,’ Harry said. ‘She’s a pureblood. It wouldn’t just be covered up.’

‘She’s disloyal and she’s dangerous.' Riddle knelt beside her. Smoothed her hair from her forehead. ‘She can’t remember this.’

He aimed his wand between her eyebrows.

‘Obliviate.’

Belinda didn’t stir and after a moment, Riddle stood up. Harry dropped her hand—he hadn’t realised he was still feeling her pulse—and did the same. His own had faint traces of blood.

He looked at Riddle. Didn’t know what to say.

Something made a noise down the alley and they both spun around.

‘An animal,’ Riddle said. ‘It’s nothing.’

Harry’s mind raced. Abraxas was only next door. There were hundreds of students in the village today. Arnoldo. And Harry was the person who had left with her. Left, and she was lying there, she was – she was –

‘Do you know how to revive her and heal her head injury?’ Riddle said. His voice was still mild.

‘I only know basic healing charms,’ Harry said. ‘What about you?’

‘Me too,’ Riddle said. ‘And trying anything could leave her with brain damage. Healing is a very delicate art.’ He sounded as though he was talking about the weather.

Harry was unable to look away from her. Her vacant face seemed to mock him; innocent, soft, everything she didn’t want to be.

He looked back at Riddle. Riddle, who *didn't know how to heal her.*

When he spoke, his voice seemed very loud. It echoed in the emptiness, down the alleyway and seemingly to the other side.

‘What do we *do?’*

Chapter End Notes

I meant to post this a lot earlier but I’m sick in bed with covid

A Lesson in Lying

Part III

They couldn't have stayed there more than ten minutes but to Harry, it felt like forever. Every second he was expecting someone to come down the alleyway; every second he was expecting Belinda's breathing to die away, or her mouth to open as she asked what her name was.

He stared at her without seeing. Her words still rattled through his head; warped now, so they sounded like pleas.

He looked at Riddle. Could he call him Riddle anymore? After everything that had happened, every ridiculous thing, did a name make a difference?

'We —we're going to be expelled,' Harry said. 'She's —'

He didn't know what she was. A pureblood. A liar.

She knew everything. And now she was obliviated, now her head was pouring blood, and she was lying at a painful angle, her pale ring-clad hand stretched out.

'What did you wipe from her memory?'

'Everything that happened since she met with Arnoldo. The idea she had to steal the cloak. The meetings with Grindelwald in her house.' He shrugged. 'We leave her here. She won't remember.'

'She left with me,' Harry said, 'Abraxas knows. Her boyfriend –'

'Then I'll obliviate them too.'

Harry stared at him. 'You can't obliviate Abraxas. What do you think will happen when the professors find out?'

'They *won't* find out.' His voice was very low. 'No-one will.'

'How? You don't think she promised Grindelwald? He's not going to forget as well. And her parents will want to know why their daughter was obliviated – '

'I doubt it,' Tom said. 'They aren't the caring sort.'

‘They are if they think it’s an attack on the Lestrange family.’

‘Calm down,’ Tom said, and something about his careless way was contagious. ‘She won’t remember anything. And if you burst into that restaurant and say you were both attacked and you couldn’t help her, no-one will be wiser.’

‘Ok,’ Harry said slowly. ‘What happens when this is investigated?’

Tom shook his head. ‘She’s not *dead*, Harry. Only attacked.’

He remembered Katie last year, and how long she had to spend in St. Mungo’s. *That* was never traced back to Malfoy.

But this seemed different. Maybe it was all the blood. The fact she knew—had known—everything. This time Harry was the perpetrator and Tom—

‘What do you mean you *felt* I was in danger?’

‘I just knew. A feeling.’ But for a second, Tom looked troubled. Then it disappeared.

‘Go now,’ he said. ‘You saw a masked figure and tried to hold him off. You don’t know who it was, student or otherwise.’

And then, unnecessarily, he gave Harry a slight push. The contact with Tom’s hands—alive, real—snapped Harry to the present. ‘And what’ll you do? *Run away?’*

Tom didn’t answer and Harry found he didn’t care. Standing here was wasting time. Belinda’s breathing could shallow, could die away . . .

He hurried back to the pub, not meeting anyone there. He saw Abraxas who looked up in relief. A second later his eyes widened.

Harry ran over, and Abraxas and Arnoldo stood.

‘Belinda,’ Harry gasped out. ‘We were attacked.’

‘You were —’ Abraxas’ mouth opened and closed but no words came out. ‘Where is she?’

Arnoldo grabbed Harry by his robes, almost lifting him off the ground. ‘What did you do, boy?’

‘I didn’t do anything,’ he snapped, shoving him off. ‘Come on. *Please.*’

It was easy to keep the panic in his voice. Especially when Abraxas turned to him, horrified and betrayed, knocking into a chair as he made for the door.

Harry led them down the alleyway, his heart still plummeting. '. . . And I couldn't see the person's face, they had a mask —'

'A mask?' Arnoldo repeated sharply.

'Yes, we thought it was a joke at first. Then she got hit with something and I tried to stop it. And there was all this light –'

They reached where Belinda lay. Abraxas rushed over and knelt beside her. He began to mumble something under his breath, and at first Harry thought he was talking to himself, but the blood around her head siphoned away.

Arnoldo stopped dead in his tracks. 'It feels —' he waved his hand. 'Dark.'

He took out his wand and began casting. Light filled the area around them, faint, misty shapes appearing through it. They moved around where she lay, all different but the same. They all had the same feeling: it was like being close to a Dementor.

'A fight went on here,' Arnoldo muttered. 'So you're telling the truth. Many spells. The stunner –you tried that?'

Harry didn't say anything and Arnoldo continued without paying attention. He continued muttering to himself and after a moment, stiffened. 'Something *dark.'*

'That wasn't us,' Harry said, 'it wasn't –'

It hadn't even happened. There hadn't been a fight. Why did Arnoldo's spells detect one?

Tom.

Harry hadn't hesitated when he left him alone, though he could have used the entire situation to frame Harry. What he had done made less sense. Made it seem like a fight had *actually* happened – a fight from a third person, who wasn't Harry or Belinda.

'She needs to go to the hospital wing,' Abraxas said, voice cracking. 'Now.'

He lifted her and staggered. Just as Harry thought he would topple, he steadied. ‘Whoever did this might still be there. They might attack someone else. We need a professor.’

They left the alleyway and into the busy part of Hogsmeade, packed with students and shoppers. Harry tried to help Abraxas carry Belinda, but he shrugged him off. When people spotted them, they stopped dead. A hush—a hush worse than if someone had cast a silencing charm—filled the street.

Then came the whispers. The people coming forward for a better look. The crowd parted for Professor Flitwick, who levitated Belinda from Abraxas’ arms and onto a stretcher-like object hovering beside him.

Abraxas was frantically babbling out the story. ‘Attacked . . . Harry . . . doesn’t know who . . .’

‘You were attacked?’ Flitwick said, turning to Harry. ‘You and Belinda?’

He didn’t trust his voice and nodded.

Where was Tom?

He had left. Left Harry alone to deal with all this and to save himself. Was he already back with the other Slytherins? Already hiding his wand in case someone checked it?

‘Everyone, back to the castle,’ Flitwick said. He tapped his throat and his voice boomed through the whole village. ‘Professors and prefects, please gather the students and make your way immediately back to the castle. That means everyone *stick together.*’

The silence broke and people were talking loud now, loud and panicked, and all moving at once. Harry slipped through the crowd, unnoticed, as Abraxas and Flitwick levitated Belinda past. He didn’t see Arnoldo anywhere. Did he go to the castle or somewhere else?

Harry walked on. He was going to have to answer questions. He might even have to see her parents. Dumbledore was going to talk to him. He would fix things, wouldn’t he?

He couldn’t see Ron and Hermione. What would they think when they heard Flitwick’s announcement? He shoved through the throng of students, scanning for them.

As he moved someone grabbed his arm, tugging him down the side of a shop building. Harry resisted for a second, his wand already out, before he noticed the hand and the black and gold ring.

'You're still here,' Harry said, when they were both out of sight.

'Still here?' Tom said, and Harry could just make out his frown in the dark passage.

'I thought you ran off,' Harry said. 'You know —'

Fled. Left. Saved yourself.

'You look too suspicious,' Tom said. 'Get rid of the guilty look. *No-one* is going to find out.'

'What did you do to the magic? Around the —' *Crime scene.* 'Alleyway.'

'I tampered with it. Even if it's inspected, no-one will question your story now.'

'If they don't check your wand,' Harry muttered.

Tom gave him a sharp, mistrustful look. His hand—which still held Harry's arm—tightened.

'I'm not going to tell on you,' Harry said. '*God* -'

He had saved him. Somehow. Maybe caused more hassle with his quick violence and memory charms, but still. Harry might have been obliviated if it wasn't for him.

'Only talk about it when you're asked a direct question,' Tom said. 'And start looking less worried and more *upset.'*

Harry scowled.

'I need to assist the younger students back to the castle. It would look less suspicious if you went now as well. Don't give them a reason to think you're hiding something.'

His voice lowered. Harry was aware of the way he was still grasping his arm tightly but didn't bother prise it off. 'And remember. You have done nothing wrong.'

He released his arm and stepped back.

‘Right,’ Harry said, ‘I’ll just act like you then. An unfeeling prat.’

But Tom had already slipped back into the street and gotten lost in the crowd.

Harry stood where he was for a moment.

You have done nothing wrong.

Of course he would think that. If Harry murdered Slughorn, Tom would think he had done nothing wrong.

He waited another moment, squared his shoulders, and prepared for the journey back to the castle and whatever would come next.

His stomach was twisting with guilt but he gradually became numb to it. He could do nothing but continue, go on, don’t think, don’t react –

He slipped into a crowd of students and followed the professors back to the school. He couldn’t see Abraxas anymore and quickened his pace. After what seemed like forever, the shops thinned out and the silhouette of the castle became clear. Students around him, who had been silent for the journey, started to talk.

‘Right, everyone, follow me into the Great Hall and we’ll call a roll.’

They went past the greenhouses, across the sodden lawns, through the oak front doors –

‘Mr Potter?’ It was Flitwick, moving through the crowd. ‘There you are! Are you hurt? Follow me to the hospital wing. Then the headmaster wishes to speak with you.’

The noise stilled as people wondered what was going on.

‘Did you not see him with the other boy? Malfoy?’

‘Maybe he was there when it happened.’

Flitwick grabbed his elbow and shot the crowd a sharp glance. ‘Come on, Mr Potter.’

Harry's heart pounded furiously as they went up the marble staircase. The Headmaster. *Dippet,* not Dumbledore.

'Don't worry about it,' Flitwick said, 'Miss Lestrange is in the best of care right now. Did you get hit with anything?'

'I don't think so,' Harry said. 'She'll be ok, then?'

'She hasn't woken but things are looking well and she should be able to talk to us in a few hours. Now, what exactly happened?'

'We were leaving a pub,' Harry said. 'Me and her. I don't know what it was called –Abraxas can probably tell you.'

'First time in Hogsmeade?' Flitwick said, sounding sympathetic. 'I promise you, it's usually a fun experience.'

They reached the Hospital Wing and Harry was saved from telling the rest of the story when the doors burst open and Abraxas came out.

'Harry! There you are! What –what –' He caught sight of Flitwick. 'What happened?'

'Mr Potter needs to be checked for curses immediately,' Professor Flitwick said, and went through the doors, Harry and Abraxas on his heels. 'It appears Miss Lestrange will make a full recovery.'

He was steered over to the nearest bed and the matron, who came out from behind one of the curtained-off beds, bustled over.

Unlike Madame Pomfrey, she asked a lot of questions. 'Are you in pain? Anywhere? Describe the colour of the light as best you can.

'I think I dodged everything,' he said, 'and it was over very fast – I don't know–'

He was prodded with magic for several long minutes. 'You appear fine Mr. Potter,' the matron finally said, 'thank merlin for that.'

Abraxas used this moment to ask a dozen questions. 'What was she hit with? Was the village searched? When will she wake up?'

'Miss Lestrange was subjected to what appears to be a very strong Knockback Jink and a memory charm. The effects of that—and whether St. Mungo's is needed—will be revealed when she wakes.'

Harry's stomach gave a sickening swoop. *It will be fine*, he told himself

firmly, *it will all be fine.*

The Hospital Wing doors opened and in came half a dozen professors: Professor Slughorn taking the front, then Professor Beery, Professor Merrythought, Headmaster Dippet, and Dumbledore.

Harry went to get up from the bed but the matron prevented it. ‘Can’t you see I’m not finished?’ she snapped. ‘Stay there.’

He waited, while she prepared a potion which had the colour and consistency of curdled eggs.

‘Are all the students safely back?’ Professor Merrythought said.

Dumbledore and Slughorn both nodded. ‘I left the Slytherins with Mr Riddle,’ Slughorn said, and Harry’s stomach gave another lurch. ‘All of them very unsettled, of course. One of their own . . . '

‘I did the same with Miss Shafiq,’ Dumbledore said. ‘Our Head Students should be sufficient until we have all this cleared up.’

He turned to Harry. ‘Now, my boy, would you like to tell us what happened?’ He looked at Harry carefully, but Harry didn’t dare let anything slip on his face, not with the others around.

‘Quite right, Albus,’ Dippet said, ‘I personally wouldn’t like the Ministry involved again, not with all the hassle with Myrtle.’

Harry’s eyebrows rose and Professor Merrythought tutted.

‘Let the boy talk. There is no need for the Ministry to be involved unless Miss Lestrange’s parents demand it.’

Harry cleared his throat. ‘I was in Hogsmeade with Abraxas. Then we saw Belinda, she was with her fiancé –Arnoldo something.’

‘Flint,’ Abraxas supplied.

‘And we decided to . . . meet up with them. You know, have a chat.’

‘Continue,’ Professor Dippet said. Harry swallowed as all the professors stared at him intensely.

‘Anyway, we followed them to a different part of Hogsmeade. Quieter.’

‘It was The Sphinx,’ Abraxas said quietly. ‘The pub they were in.’

Flitwick frowned. ‘That’s not a nice place for students.’

Harry shrugged. ‘It’s where they went,’ he said. ‘We sat down at their table –’

The Hospital Wing doors opened again and Tom walked in.

Harry froze and the matron turned to him with a concerned look on her face. ‘You sure you’re alright, dear?’

He nodded, unable to tear his eyes away.

‘It’s been quite an ordeal,’ Professor Flitwick said. ‘You must be in shock.’

Harry didn’t say anything and only looked at Tom, who was coming over to Professor Slughorn.

‘The seventh-years are very worried,’ he said, ‘and were all planning on coming to the Hospital Wing. I told them, of course, it wouldn’t be appropriate. But they insisted I find out what happened, and where Harry Potter and Abraxas Malfoy are.’

‘Good boy, Tom,’ Slughorn said, distracted. ‘And the younger students?’

‘I eased their concerns. I believe a few games of gobstones and chess have already started.’

‘Good . . . good . . .’

Harry thought it was downright bold of him to come here, instead of staying away and avoiding suspicion. Or maybe he didn’t trust Harry to not tell on him. Whatever it was, Tom looked perfectly at ease, as though he should be there, the diligent Head Boy. No-one seemed to bat an eye, except Professor Dumbledore, who frowned.

‘I will be with them shortly with the news,’ Slughorn murmured. ‘But it doesn’t look like anything will be found. The attacker vanished without a trace.’

‘Will she be alright, professor?’ Tom said, managing to sound very concerned, and effortlessly inserting himself into the conversation.

Slughorn lowered his voice. ‘She was hit with a memory charm which combined with a head injury –’ he shook his head. ‘We’ll see when she wakes up.’

What did he mean, combined with a head injury? Did that make it worse? Had Tom known?

Definitely.

'Right Mr Potter, finish the story,' Professor Dippet said, his squeaking voice holding little authority.

Harry continued. 'Belinda and I left the pub. Abraxas stayed with Arnoldo –'

'You were with Arnoldo Flint the whole time?' Tom said.

Everyone turned to look at him.

'Yes,' Abraxas said glumly. 'He was there the whole time.'

'You're not surely suggesting –' Professor Beery began.

'Of course not,' Tom said smoothly. 'I was only wondering.'

Some of the professors shared looks, and Harry knew he hadn't been wondering at all. He wanted them to be questioning; give them a lead to follow, an idea.

'Does Miss Lestrange have anyone who would want to hurt her?' Professor Flitwick said, looking at Abraxas, who squirmed.

'No,' he said. 'Only her father and he wasn't there.'

The professors all shared another look.

'And you, Harry? Forgive me, boy, I know this is a sensitive topic. But you were targeted by Grindelwald in the past. You don't think that again —'

Harry has forgotten about the excuse he had given for coming to Hogwarts. He avoided Dumbledore's eye. 'I don't know. I couldn't make out the person.'

He could feel Dumbledore look at him and glanced at the Hospital Wing sheets.

'Belinda's father is close to Grindelwald,' Slughorn was muttering. 'There would be no reason he would target a student. Unless her father displeased Grindelwald somehow . . .'

‘Ridiculous,’ Professor Merrythought said. ‘If Grindelwald wanted to prove something, she wouldn’t be alive!’

They began to argue. The matron finally let Harry leave the bed and all the professors cast him sympathetic looks when they finished their whispering.

Harry couldn't say anything about it not being Grindelwald, as much as he wanted to. It seemed too close to the truth. Belinda *had* wanted the cloak for Grindelwald . . . the last thing he needed was another Dark Lord trying to kill him.

'Make sure to stay calm, boys,' Professor Merrythought said. 'We will get to the root of this matter.'

Let’s hope not, Harry thought.

‘Someone will fix her memory, won’t they?’ Abraxas asked.

‘Let’s wait until Miss Lestrange is awake,’ Slughorn said, ‘mind magic is a fickle business . . . usually best not tampered with unless it’s vital.’

Harry and Tom looked at each other. Tom gave a tiny shake of his head. And then, in the middle of all the discussion, someone groaned.

They all froze. It was coming from the bed across from Harry’s, hidden by a white curtain.

The matron rushed forward at once. ‘Everyone out, now! Now, boys, I mean it. My patient needs no distraction.’

Harry, Tom, and Abraxas were ushered out of the Hospital Wing and the door slammed shut behind them.

Harry’s mouth was dry. She was awake already.

‘How did you let this happen?’ Abraxas demanded. ‘How, Harry?’

Harry stared at him. ‘What?’

‘You were meant to watch her, not just stand there and –’

‘I didn’t just stand there!’

‘You’re great at Defence! There’s no way you could have done nothing –’

‘It happened in a few seconds. Trust me, I tried the best I could.’

‘I did trust you,’ Abraxas said, ‘and look what happened.’

Harry reeled back. ‘She’s fine,’ he snapped. ‘Woken up already.’

Tom cleared his throat. ‘Let’s wait and see, shall we, Abraxas?’

Abraxas looked like he wanted to argue and thought better of it. As the silence ticked on, Tom raised an eyebrow.

‘Yes. We’ll see.’ He turned to squint at the hospital wing doors, as though he could see through them.

‘There’s no point staying here,’ Tom said, ‘we may not have news for a while.’

‘I’m staying,’ Abraxas said, without turning around.

‘Very well. Harry?’

Harry tore his eyes away from the doors. ‘Yeh. Yeh, I’m coming.’

They walked until they were out of earshot. ‘What’s *his* problem?’ Harry muttered.

‘Oh, Belinda and Abraxas grew up together. He’s always been protective. And he *better* not cause trouble.’ Tom’s nostrils flared and for the first time, Harry saw a flicker of fear on his face.

It made him anxious. It would have been better if they went with the truth. Belinda attacked him, there was a fight . . .

‘What if they fix her memory,’ Harry said, ‘get a healer in to see to her.’

‘Minds are only worked on if the patient is missing large sections of their life. A few moments—as far as the professors are aware—won’t be sufficient.’

‘But –’ Harry began.

‘And even if Belinda’s parents insist on taking her to St. Mungo’s, it will be at least a day until she is moved. That’s more than enough time.’

‘For what?’

‘To convince her. With the right persuasion, Belinda will refuse.’

‘The right threat,’ Harry said.

He couldn’t let anyone poke in Belinda’s head. Not with the things she knew. The time-travel. The Deathly Hallows.

‘We need to get Dumbledore,’ Harry said.

'Dumbledore?' Tom repeated, his voice low and dangerous. ‘*Why?'*

'Because he can cover for us! Trust me, he knows –’ he stopped himself. 'He knows about Grindelwald. And I trust him.'

'Charming. *You trust him*. I don't. Dumbledore doesn't like Slytherins. No matter how close you are to him, telling him isn’t wise.’

'And would you prefer to have Belinda's mind read? He at least has authority. What the hell are you going to do?’

'I'll deal with her.'

'How?' Harry said. 'By threatening her? Obliviating her a few more times? Saying you’ll make her life miserable if she lets anyone near her with a wand?’

‘You think spilling your guilty guts to the Head of Gryffindor will solve everything?’ Tom said. ‘You may have a blind faith in him, but I don't. Dumbledore would love nothing more than to pin something on me. How do I know it isn't your intention as well?'

Harry began to argue but Tom continued. 'I'm not going to risk getting expelled in some scheme you and Dumbledore cook up.'

'I wouldn't do that,' Harry said immediately. 'We're *both* involved in this.’

'Spare me the morals. You want to tell Dumbledore than Belinda was trying to steal your invisibility cloak? That she cornered you down an alley to deliver it to Grindelwald?’

'Yes,' Harry said.

'And what if he decides *he* wants it? What will you do then?'

'Dumbledore wouldn't steal my cloak,' Harry said.

They glared at each other. Tom's eyes were very dark and full of anger. ‘What is it about the cloak, anyway? That makes Grindelwald want it?’

‘Don’t know,’ Harry said, and Tom laughed, loud and harsh.

‘Liar,’ he said. ‘You should have no problem with this story then, Harry. You’ve had plenty of practice making things up.’

It hit Harry viciously, like Tom had intended. He stared at him for a moment, sheer dislike making his head spin, and Tom stared back, haughty face full of conviction –

‘Fine. Let’s go back to the Hospital Wing. You know, before someone *tries Legilimency*, or her parents get called.’

Tom clenched his jaw. ‘I did it for you, remember. If you even think of twisting the story for your own gain –’

‘Unlike you, I’m a decent person,’ Harry said. ‘And what will do you exactly – try and kill me again?’

‘That was a misunderstanding.’

Harry counted to ten slowly in his head. ‘That’s one way to see it,’ he said, and set off down the hall, back towards the Hospital Wing. He felt Tom’s eyes on him the whole time but he didn’t talk, and Harry was thankful. The desire to punch him in the face was overwhelming.

Abraxas was still outside the Hospital Wing doors when they arrived and had started to pace. ‘The curtain’s closed. I can’t see what’s going on.’

‘Yeh, that’s the whole point of a curtain,’ Harry said. ‘People can’t typically see through.’

Abraxas shot him an annoyed look and Tom smirked.

‘I can’t hear anything either,’ Abraxas said, ‘and all the professors are still in there – ’

Right,’ Harry said. Enough was enough

He pushed the hospital wing doors open, ignoring Tom and Abraxas’ incredulous faces, and stepped inside.

The sheet around Belinda’s bed opened, and the matron poked her

head around. Harry saw Belinda clearly, propped by several pillows.

‘What is the meaning of this? Didn’t I say *out!’* She grabbed the curtain again, and as she was about to close it, Belinda said, ‘wait.’

The matron turned to her. ‘What?’

‘I want to see him.’

‘Mr. Potter?’

She nodded. She looked, Harry noticed, even paler than usual. But there was no sign of injury anymore, her white-blonde hair devoid of its bloody tinge.

The matron hesitated a moment longer and Dumbledore put a hand on her shoulder. ‘I’d also like to have a chat with Harry after this. If you’re up for it, that is?’

Harry nodded. He could feel Tom’s eyes boring into his head.

So paranoid, he thought.

‘Very well. You two — out!’

Abraxas began to protest loudly but Tom just smiled at her and left. Harry didn’t miss the way his eyes lingered on Belinda and how she shrank back a little into her pillows.

‘Now, boy,’ the matron said, when Abraxas slammed the door behind him. ‘We were just talking to Belinda. She can’t remember anything about the incident so your memory is vital.’

‘Oh,’ Harry said, and looking at Belinda, who had a blank sort of look on her face. ‘That’s all she’s forgotten then?’

The professors shared a look. ‘It appears so. However, she refuses to let anyone look through her head –’

‘You aren’t qualified,’ Belinda said, ‘and I don’t want anyone poking around in my mind.’

‘Of course, of course, dear,’ the matron said, and Belinda clenched her teeth.

‘I’ll say it again.’ She was looking only at Harry. ‘We were leaving The Sphinx. I think I saw someone from the corner of my eye. And the

next thing, I woke up here.'

Harry hadn't realised he was holding his breath. 'That's pretty much it,' he said, 'I didn't get a good look at them either.'

'Well, can you describe them? In any way?'

Harry pretended to think about it. 'No,' he said finally. 'They might have been wearing a mask. And dark clothing.'

'*Why* did you say you left with Mr Potter again?'

Belinda cocked her head, frowning. 'He wanted my help buying something. But I really think Abraxas wanted a chat with Arnoldo.'

Harry exhaled. She had forgotten.

'Very well, then. You only seem to have forgotten a few moments. However, if you don't want us to look through your mind, we'll have to go over some more questions.'

The matron asked her several things: her middle name, which was Aurelia. The age of her sister, ten. The last lesson she remembered going to. On and on . . .

'Harry,' Dumbledore said quietly. 'Would you join me on a walk? Perhaps it will help clear your head?'

'Yeh,' Harry said immediately. 'Definitely.'

The corridor outside the Hospital Wing was empty. Harry sighed in relief.

'The story you told in the hospital wing,' Dumbledore said, as they went down the empty staircases. 'Is that what happened?'

'Doesn't it sound like the truth, sir?'

'The truth, Harry, is rarely that simple. And I've come to realise that with you, things aren't always as they seem.'

Harry hesitated. 'She knows everything. Grindelwald is Hallow Hunting.'

He caught the look on Dumbledore's face and didn't want to continue. 'Her father is a follower.'

‘Yes. One of Grindelwald’s most loyal in Britain.’

'She found out about my cloak. Saw it. I was being reckless. Wasn't thinking. And she listened – followed me, I suppose. Found out about the time-travel, about the deathly hallows. She must have heard Grindelwald mention them . . .’

It felt wonderful to get it off his chest.

‘. . . and Riddle came along. He said he sensed it. And then he blasted her backwards, or something. And obliviated her.’

Dumbledore sighed. 'Tom Riddle,' he repeated. 'When isn't he involved?'

'It wasn't like that,' Harry said. 'It was more of an impulse thing. In fact, if he wasn't there –’ He realised he was defending him when Dumbledore raised his eyebrows.

'It comes back to Grindelwald,’ Dumbledore murmured. ‘And how can you be sure of what Tom Riddle heard?’

‘I can’t,’ Harry said, ‘but she didn’t mention time-travel towards the end. So if he heard something, out of context –’

‘You hold onto the possibility he wouldn’t piece it together.’ Dumbledore shook his head. ‘Very well, Harry, I see this matter comes down to Grindelwald.’

‘He’ll blame me when he hears she’s obliviated,’ Harry said. ‘Go after the cloak himself –’

‘Do not concern yourself with Gellert Grindelwald,’ Dumbledore said, his voice suddenly stern. ‘You’re at Hogwarts. While here, no harm can come to you.’

Harry thought of all the harm that had come to him at Hogwarts, but this Dumbledore wouldn’t know.

‘Go back to your Common Room. Let the professors sort this one out. Heaven knows it’s time.’

Harry did so, reluctantly. He let his feet guide him to the dungeons and into the Common Room. He didn’t run into anyone on his way there, not even a ghost.

Outside the Common Room entrance, he braced himself, muttered the

password and let the wall slide open. The room had never been more packed. All the chairs were full, and a couple dozen younger students were sitting on the floor.

Everyone looked up when Harry came in and immediately started talking.

'Where is she?'

'What happened?'

'Did you really get attacked by Grindelwald himself?'

'No,' Harry said, scoffing at how ridiculous that was.

'I heard muggles got into Hogsmeade and done it,' Rosier was saying.

Harry stared at him, unable to comprehend the stupidity. 'Yeh, because muggles can use wands,' he said, 'and go around firing curses.'

'Then what did happen, Potter?' There was an eager glint in his eye. 'You going to tell us?'

'I dunno,' Harry said, 'we were walking, someone came out of nowhere. I didn't see their face.'

'Well, what colour were their robes? Did they sound German?'

'They didn't *speak.'* He ignored the rest of the questions, wishing he had never entered the Common Room.

Abraxas shoved his way through the crowd. 'What did Belinda say when you spoke to her?' His voice waved and he didn't meet Harry's eye.

'She said she feels fine. She can't remember anything since we left the pub.'

'Well, that's Hogsmeade visits gone,' Rosier said, 'thanks a lot, Potter.'

Harry bit back a retort. Rosier had a sneer on his face and Harry knew he was waiting to cause a fight.

Lucretia asked the same question Flitwick had: weren't you attacked by Grindelwald? Isn't that why you came to Hogwarts in the first place?

And no matter how many times Harry said it was just an attack he got caught in, that he wasn't a target, people weren't convinced. He could see the mistrustful expressions he knew the Gryffindors wouldn't have. The fear on some of the younger students faces. The unspoken questions hanging in the air.

He left the Common Room and went to the boys' dorm. The invisibility cloak was stowed in his robes, and he took it out, running his hands over the material. What if Belinda had told someone? Or what if Grindelwald gave another student the task of retrieving it?

It was his *father's* cloak. The only piece of James Potter Harry had. He couldn't think of anywhere safe to put it and eventually stowed it back in his robes, its weight a reassuring presence.

A few moments later, the doors open and Harry turned wearily around.

'They'll settle down, you know,' Tom said.

'Can't you *do* anything?'

'As long as they don't jump to any dangerous conclusions, it's best to let them *think* they have their own opinions.' He smiled thinly. 'What does Belinda remember?'

'Leaving with me. And she thinks it's because Abraxas wanted a chat with her fiancé, which is basically what happened. She doesn't remember anything past that.'

'What were the professors saying?'

'They wanted to look through her mind but Belinda protested. Said she didn't want anyone looking through her head.'

Tom looked satisfied. 'That's convenient. Her family are very dark. She would have a lot of incriminating evidence which could lead to the *wrong* sort of questions and possibly an investigation.'

'Of course she would,' Harry muttered.

'And what I *really* want to know'—he lowered his voice— 'is what happened on that walk with Dumbledore?'

Harry's mouth was dry. 'You're not going to like it.'

'Is that so?'

‘I told him. Everything. Just like you said not to.’

Tom’s eyes flashed red. ‘You did the *opposite* of what I said? Do you think this is some kind of game? Don’t you realise what your naivety —what your trust in that stupid old man—could do?’

‘I’m not naive.’ He wasn’t, not anymore. ‘And I don’t do what you *say*.’

Tom looked so angry Harry wouldn’t be surprised if he cursed him there and then. ‘You think because you trust him, Dumbledore will guard all your secrets? That you can go and blab *without permission* –’

‘I don’t need permission! You’re only scared you’ll get in trouble. What am I, seven? If I wanted you expelled, there are a *lot* of better reasons.’

His voice shook in anger. ‘Dumbledore doesn’t like you, but he isn’t going to personally get you expelled. He won’t be a problem. In fact—‘ he pointed a finger at the dormitory door. ‘They’ll be a bigger problem.’

‘The Slytherins?’ Tom shook his head. ‘They aren’t going to find out the truth. You know that, don’t you? Not even poor Abraxas. Not even if you feel bad.’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’ He looked at Harry for a moment and appeared to be satisfied. ‘Because it’s our secret now.’

And Harry looked down at his duvet, felt the invisibility cloak in his pocket, and let the word *secret*rattle through his head. Secrets, so many secrets, they seemed to multiply every day. So many things at stake. He felt it whisper in his mind, another one to add to his substantial collection. He looked at Tom and he almost laughed.

Their secret indeed.

Hallows and Horcruxes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Belinda stayed in the hospital wing overnight and breakfast the next morning was a tense affair. When the owls came in, Harry abandoned his cereal to read the Daily Prophet. But after scanning it from start to finish, he found no mention of the Hogsmeade incident.

That didn't stop the theories, however.

'Remember last week's paper?' Avery said. 'Grindelwald in Britain?'

'Are you stupid?' someone else scoffed. 'Her father's practically his right-hand man.'

'I'm saying maybe he displeased him.'

'You think Grindelwald's attacking purebloods now?'

'Someone is.'

The smell of food was making Harry feel sick. They were wrong. He desperately wanted to refute their theories but instead, he could only sit there. Wait until the interest died away.

After breakfast, he met Ron and Hermione outside the Hall. This was the part he had been dreading. They both looked tired – Hermione's hair was so wild it was as though she hadn't brushed it in days, and under Ron's eyes were dark purple circles. Harry imagined them lying awake, worrying, listening to the countless stories of the event.

'What happened?' Hermione immediately asked. 'Everyone's saying Lestrange was attacked in Hogsmeade and you were with her. And we didn't see you at all yesterday! We went to the hospital wing and they said you had left.'

'Let's go outside.' Harry cast a furtive glance around. 'We talk too openly.'

They went down the stone steps and into the courtyard. Like the Entrance Hall, it was empty. The wind whipped around their cloaks, strong enough to snatch away any remnants of conversation. Harry

still cast *muffliato*.

'Is that necessary?' Hermione said, pulling her robes tight against her in the cold.

'Trust me,' Harry said, 'It would have solved a lot of problems.'

He lowered his voice and told them what had happened in Hogsmeade. Throughout the story, Ron was silent, his eyes steadily getting wider. Hermione interrupted several times.

'What do you mean she *drugged you*?' she said, high and shrill.

'It was some sort of sleeping potion. I thought I was just being paranoid.'

'And she did all that to *see* your cloak? Why not take it there and then?'

'She knew I'd notice. And it would get linked back to her. She was careful.'

He continued, and Hermione crossed her arms. Her face went from furious to indignant to horrified.

'You think she would have – killed you?' Ron whispered.

Harry remembered the look on her face –hard and desperate and *scared*—and shook his head. 'Obliviated, probably. She just wanted to prove herself. If she got Grindelwald what he was looking for, she would have his protection.'

'Who bloody cares?' Ron said, 'she could have got it from Dumbledore!'

'She wouldn't. Slytherins – they hate Dumbledore.'

Harry had forgotten about the cold now. Ron and Hermione were both giving him their full attention, matching expressions on their faces.

Harry hesitantly went on. He knew they wouldn't like this bit.

'Riddle?' Ron said, his eyebrows raised, '*Riddle* obliviated Lestrange?'

'Yeah,' Harry said, 'and then we pretended she was attacked.'

Hermione gave him a sharp look. 'It's very convenient Riddle

happened to be in the right place at the right time. How can you be sure he obliviated her? Or be sure of anything he might have heard?'

'He didn't hear about the time-travel,' Harry said, 'and no, Hermione. I can't be sure.'

She watched him carefully. 'Why did he bother? Get involved, obliviate her? I'm glad, of course, but I don't understand *why.'*

'Well, if anything happened to me, we know he'd be the prime suspect,' Harry said. She didn't look convinced. 'He's interested in me or something. Probably thinks I'd be a great addition to his Death Eater collection.'

Neither of them smiled.

'He wants you on his side,' Hermione said. 'He wants you to forget what he's like.'

Harry made a disbelieving noise. 'I think all the murder attempts ruined that plan.'

Her face froze and it took Harry's brain a second to catch up.

'What murder attempts,' Ron said slowly.

Harry's heart quickened. 'I was exaggerating. It was only once.'

He had no choice but to tell them. The whole day came out in a rush – *I saw Riddle with the Grey Lady; they were talking about Ravenclaw's Diadem.*

This distracted both Ron and Hermione for several minutes, as they digested the thought that they now knew the final horcrux.

But as he continued, downplaying the event as much as he could – *it was just a little snake, no really, you know it couldn't have hurt me* – there was a tense silence. The courtroom was deathly still: even the trees had stopped swaying.

'I knew there was a reason you stopped speaking about Riddle,' Hermione said. Her voice was low. 'But I didn't know it was this.'

'Tell Dumbledore,' Ron said. 'Get him expelled.'

'And what good will that do? He'll still be dangerous, only this time he'll have a reason to get revenge.'

‘Why did you hide this? That’s *attempted murder*.’

‘I know,’ Harry said, ‘I did it because I knew you would react like this.’

They gawked at him.

‘For good reason,’ Hermione said, her voice high. ‘Someone has to be logical.’

‘You always want to run to the professors. *It doesn’t work.’*

Didn’t they know? Didn’t they know just how good Tom Riddle could lie? He had gotten away with *murder*before.

‘Well, you want to deal with everything yourself,’ Ron said. ‘Why do you do that? Riddle tried to kill you. Lestrange tried to kill you –’

‘—and honestly, it would be better if you stopped associating with Riddle altogether!’ Hermione finished.

Harry resisted the urge to snap at her. ‘I told you, it’s not that simple. We’re in the same house. The same dorm. We share the same classes. And oh yes, we share the same *dreams* too!’

‘Don’t get defensive,’ Ron said, ‘we know that. Can’t you ignore it?’

‘Yeh, I’m sure that would work. Hey, Riddle, I know you’re wondering why you have a *direct link into my mind* but don’t worry about it. It’s nothing. He already thinks it’s this – this weird thing. If I avoid him, he’ll be suspicious. All the Slytherins will be. They already don’t like the fact I’m not a Death Eater –’

‘And what does Riddle think about that?’ Hermione interrupted.

‘He hasn’t mentioned it, actually.’

She stared at him, as though she was searching his face for something. Then her expression turned accusing.

‘You’re starting to like him. He’s manipulating you and you’re allowing it to happen.’

‘Yeh, Hermione, I like the bloke who’s tried to kill me. We’re best friends, didn’t you know?’ The words tasted wrong and came out harsher than he intended. Sharp.

She faltered. ‘He tried to kill you and you’re going to do nothing?

You're going to let him orchestrate this plan, you're going to be an accomplice to this – this mess?'

'It's my mess,' Harry said, 'if I don't, and anyone pokes through Belinda's head, *everyone* knows we're time-travellers. Would you like to see that, right on the cover of the Daily Prophet?'

'Of course not!' she said, 'there are other ways – sensible, logical ways –'

'I told Dumbledore,' Harry said. 'That's sensible.'

The wind started blowing again, and it seemed to snatch away Hermione's words. She hesitated, wringing her hands together, glancing at him and away.

'Maybe we should focus on getting home,' Ron said.

Harry turned to him. 'How? There *are* no time-turners to the future. We've been here a month and found nothing!'

'What about my family?' His voice rose. 'What the hell about them, Harry? It's just goodbye?'

'I'm being realistic.'

'You want to be realistic?' Hermione took a step forward so she was staring directly up at him. 'You're going to slip up. You act too reckless. Like an idiot! Why did you go down that alley with Lestrange anyway? You know she's a Death Eater. And so is Abraxas Malfoy. And Tom Riddle! A murderer and a muggle hater. You think because of some dangerous scar link you should be friends. Because you're Harry Potter, you're indestructible. It's going to get worse. And it will be *your own fault.'* Her breathing was heavy but her voice didn't shake. They stared at each other.

'Always my fault, isn't it, Hermione?' His restraint was gone now, and there was nothing but anger left. Why did she assume she knew what he thought? Why did she have to *always* be right? 'Because I can't get all my answers from a school book? Because I actually speak to the people in my house? Imagine that. Do you think one look at Riddle is going to have me carving a Dark Mark into my arm?'

'You're a prick,' Ron said. 'And your whole house *are*Death Eaters.'

'And I'm not! What do you want me to do – kill them? Or are they my

responsibility?'

'You know we don't think that,' Ron said, 'I don't care if you're a Slytherin. But you won't talk to us anymore, Harry, and that's weird. Then you come out with *this,*and all that stuff with Riddle – Hermione's right.'

Harry's ears were buzzing. 'Hermione's right? You have to say that, don't you, Ron? Do you ever think I don't talk to you because I know *exactly* how you'll react?'

He said nothing.

The silence between them was suffocating. It caught in Harry's throat and made his chest constrict. He couldn't look away from them, no matter how much it hurt. Everything felt *hot* and red and unfair.

'You know we support your decisions, Harry,' Hermione said. Her voice was finally beginning to shake. 'Though I will never agree to your stupid ideas about Riddle.'

'Fine,' Harry snapped. 'That's your opinion. But call me an idiot again, Hermione. You know you want to.'

She didn't. Her lips wobbled and she burst into tears. Ron put an arm around her shoulder and gave Harry a dirty look.

'It's your own problem now,' he said.

And Hermione's face hardened. Despise the fresh tears on her cheeks, her eyes were sharp and unmistakably decided. They left.

The courtyard was silent but Harry's ears still rang. He wondered what was wrong with him and couldn't summon the urge to follow them and apologise.

Ron just went along with what Hermione said, he thought savagely. And they could snog, and have fun, but if Harry wanted to not deal with something for one moment, even *breathed* near a Slytherin, it was the end of the world.

He knew better than any of them what Tom Riddle was like. He was the one there, stuck right in the snake pit with him. They had never *spoken* to him before.

They didn't have to deal with any of this and yet it was all *his* fault?

A bird burst from the trees in a flurry of feathers and screeches. Its call rang out against the empty sky. Harry watched it and the heavy, hot ball in his stomach constricted.

He couldn't stop thinking about them all day.

Harry never fell out with both Ron and Hermione at once and it was a strange, lonely feeling. He didn't have Ginny here. Ginny, he realised guiltily, who he hadn't thought about in ages. There was no Neville or Luna. No Quidditch Team. No Weasleys . . .

He could still see Ron and Hermione's faces. Hermione, with her forehead creased. Ron's jaw set. He could imagine their voices as though they were right there beside him.

The only time Harry stopped thinking about Ron and Hermione was when he went back to the common room and saw Belinda. A small crowd had gathered around her, including most of the seventh-years. They were talking loudly, excitedly.

'Oh, *there* you are,' Lucretia said. 'We were wondering.'

Harry moved closer, his curiosity getting the better of him.

'So you *don't* think it was Grindelwald?' Rosier was asking Belinda eagerly.

'I don't remember any of it,' she said.

'Yeah, but your father—what's he doing with Grindelwald?'

She stopped. A frown came over her face. *'I don't know*,' she said, slowly and deliberately. 'He doesn't tell me.'

Rosier sat back, disappointed. 'Don't you want revenge? To find out who did it?'

Belinda turned to stare into the flames of the fire. Rosier watched her for a moment, taken-aback at being ignored.

'Are you getting these stupid questions too, Harry?' She hadn't looked up.

He blinked. ‘Yeah,’ he said. He wanted to be angry but it had all drained out of him. ‘I told them we didn’t see anything. Maybe it was just –a freak attack or something.’

‘On a Lestrange?' Rosier said. 'You don't have any enemies, do you?'

'Do you ever shut up?' Belinda said.

He glared at her. 'Maybe if you would actually be entertaining –’

'She's right, piss off, Rosier,' Harry said.

What if he triggered something in Belinda’s memory? It was possible to break memory charms, after all. Harry could say the wrong thing and then –

'Still noble, I see.'

'What?'

Belinda looked up from the fire. Her face, illuminated by the green flames, had never looked more ill. 'You’re too good for this house, Harry.’

‘Er –’

He thought of Ron and Hermione, with their accusing eyes. ‘I must be here for a reason.’

She had said that before. His stomach lurched.

He needed to know exactly what she remembered, but there was no way he could ask without arousing suspicion.

What if it came back? What if it all slowly came back? What if she decided to tell Tom everything?

What if her parents said something? Sparked a memory, a thought, an idea . . .

He ended up in Dumbledore’s office.

‘I don’t even *know* how memory charms work! What if it breaks? Wears off? Or, her parents owl her and mention Grindelwald and it all clicks? What if*Grindelwald* contacts her?’

‘It is time I deal with Gellert Grindelwald,’ Dumbledore said. ‘We’ve been avoiding each other for far too long.’

In response, Fawkes made a low, crooning noise on his perch. His head was tucked under his wing.

‘Already? It’s only –’

Dumbledore held up a hand. ‘Perhaps this is changing the future. Or maybe this will be an ill-fated attempt on my part. Only you cannot tell me, Harry, and I cannot allow this to go on. Grindelwald’s plans have endangered two of my students now, which should never have happened.’

‘It’s not like you knew.’

‘Yet now I do.’ His gaze was piercing, and Harry sat up straighter in his chair. ‘Whatever the cost may be, I cannot, with good conscious, allow Grindelwald to harm another Hogwarts student.’

The words were firm and there was not a hint of doubt on Dumbledore’s face. Harry thought he looked more like the old man from his own time than the young one he had first met on arrival.

‘The Hallows,’ Harry said quietly. He had avoided mentioning them, though it nagged at his mind. The desire was now too much. He didn’t want to know, he *needed.* ‘Forgive me, sir. You and Grindelwald – you both wanted them.’

‘Foolish, wasn’t it?’ Dumbledore smiled, sad and bitter. ‘An idea destined to end in destruction. It was the beginning of a dream which led us down a dark path.’

He folded his hands on the desk and Harry stared at them, surprised by the lack of wrinkles, lack of wear. They were both pale. One wasn’t charred, burnt and black. It wasn’t *dead.* Dead and decaying; spreading like a parasite, rotting from the inside out.

He looked away.

‘I am ashamed to admit our ideas. I found Grindelwald enthralling. So easily he captured my attention, and in those two summer months, I

found not just a friend but an equal. It took my boyish youth and my thirst for a challenge and transformed my world view. We had dreams and the foolishness to believe they would be achieved. And the strongest one—the one we always agreed on—was the Deathly Hallows.

'Three objects which caused lifetimes of violence. The stone intrigued me the most. It fed something inside me I desperately tried to ignore. And those three objects – I believed they were the answer to everything. Grindelwald is still searching for the cloak you brought back through time.'

'That's what I don't get,' Harry said slowly. 'I brought it with me. Which means there should be another invisibility cloak lying around. That one of my ancestors have. *Another* Deathly Hallow.' He hesitated. 'And I'm pretty sure you gave me the Resurrection Stone.'

Surprise filled Dumbledore's eyes. 'I had –' he said quietly. 'No matter. Continue.'

'I think it's in my snitch. Well, Hermione thought it was nonsense. But there's something in it – something important.' It made sense to him in a way he couldn't explain. 'Yet the Resurrection Stone is in Riddle's Peverell Ring. And he doesn't even realise.'

And Harry would never, ever tell him.

'How does that make sense? *Two* sets of cloaks and rings?'

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair and didn't speak for a moment. Briefly, Harry wondered if telling him about the Hallows was a bad idea - after all, he had wanted them himself not long ago.

'The thing about power, Harry, is magic always finds a balance. The reason time-travel is so unheard of, so confusing, so unexplored, is because things usually sort themselves out before any changes are made. Many time-travellers die violent and unexplained deaths simply by *causing* such powerful magic to take place.

Objects of that much power –that is to say, if the legends are to be believed—would not exist twice in the same lifetime. My best guess is that when you went back in time—bringing, if you're correct, two Hallows with you—one version of the Hallows would be rendered useless.'

Harry gaped at him. 'They stopped working? Just like that?'

‘There can never be two Masters of Death or two Elder Wands. Your cloak is still faithful to you, yes?’

Harry nodded.

‘The enchantments haven’t started to fade? It isn’t showing its age?’

‘It’s perfect. The same as ever.’

‘It retains its powers.’ There was a satisfied look in his eyes. ‘And is, therefore, a Deathly Hallow.’

‘So if Grindelwald got it – got the other cloak, from whoever has it now—it would just be a cloak?’

‘While you are here, yes.’

Harry perked up. ‘Have you had any success with the time-turner?’ He couldn’t hide the hopeful edge in his voice.

Dumbledore stood up from the desk and Harry scrambled around to watch. But he only went to his spindly table and lifted the pocket-watch. When he turned back, his face was very serious.

‘I have performed every spell I can think of, Harry. I have talked to my dear friend Nicholas Flamel, who knows more about obscure magic than anyone.’ He uncurled his hand and there it sat: hands frozen in place, face shattered. ‘But it is no longer magical. Whatever burst of magic took you here has been used up.’

‘No longer magical?’ Harry repeated. ‘It’s just an old clock? It can’t be –’

He refused to believe it. He took it from Dumbledore’s hand and into his own.

‘It has to - it has to do something. Maybe it needs –’

An idea came over him, a glorious, heart-stopping idea. He was *sure* it would work. It filled him with such a wild rush of hope that he stopped breathing. Raising the pocket-watch to his eye, he looked at the grimy, shattered face and imagined a snake.

‘Fix. Work. Reparo. Open.’

It sat there, unmoving.

Harry couldn't look at Dumbledore. His head was spinning. He knew it wasn't his fault, knew it was his own, *all his own* —

'Do not give up hope.'

A laugh bubbled in his throat. 'No, of course not. I'm rejoicing. It's not like the stupid piece of rubbish does *nothing*.'

He clenched his fist and the glass pierced his skin. He didn't care.

Why keep the stupid thing around anyway? Maybe it would be better to blast it to pieces. The stupid thing which did *nothing*.

Even as he thought it, as he felt the rush of anger and disappointment, he held onto it. Something – the very same desire he had in the vault —made Harry stop.

'Guess I'll keep it,' he said. 'Until we figure something out.'

'I'm so very sorry.' Dumbledore's eyes were misty beneath his half-moon glasses and Harry felt another stab of anger.

He was Dumbledore. How could *Dumbledore* not know what to do?

'It's not your fault,' Harry said.

It's mine.

It was all Harry's fault. He felt it like a physical weight; felt like if he wasn't holding onto Dumbledore's desk he would have stumbled. How was he going to tell Ron and Hermione this?

But the thought of them was too much.

Your fault, Harry. All down to you.

As he left the office, he was more aware than ever of the invisibility cloak in his pocket. He hadn't parted with it since Hogsmeade; feared Tom would get curious and take it himself.

He thought of the snitch he had given to Hermione for safe-keeping. *I open at the close . . .*

Belinda's sly smile and Riddle's bright, intense eyes flashed in his mind, morphing into Ron and Hermione's angry faces. And he could almost hear clock hands spinning, faster and faster. Hear the cold, high laughter of Voldemort rattling in his ears. It followed him

through the castle.

Harry wanted the snitch more than ever but knew it meant going through Hermione. And hadn't he given it to her because it wasn't safe in his dorm?

That was only truer now.

The common room was no longer crowded. Belinda had disappeared and with her the seventh years. A few of the younger students looked up as he entered, but apart from whispering, they didn't speak.

However, when he reached the dormitory, he found he wasn't alone at all.

'Harry,' Tom said, wandering over from the window. 'There you are.'

'Piss off.'

His surprised expression gave Harry a sharp stab of pleasure.

'You're touchy,' he remarked. 'A fight with the two Gryffindors?'

Harry managed not to react. 'None of your business.'

'So you told them?' His eyes narrowed. '*Really,* Harry? That's three people now.'

'Three people I trust. Have you ever trusted anyone? Maybe you *should* tell people things and you won't be such a creepy murderer.'

Tom watched him for a moment and Harry wanted him to tick, wanted his jaw to clench, him to lash out. He needed Tom to react, to fire the first spell —

'Doubt it,' he said easily.

Harry let out a surprised breath of laughter. 'Right, well, this has been a great conversation, but it would be nice if you left.'

'If *I* left? Do you want to mope alone? Maybe write a few letters and inform the whole wizarding world?'

He bristled and Harry wanted, recklessly, to see just how far he could push Tom.

‘It’s been a busy day. I want to sleep.’

‘You’re such a liar,’ Tom said. ‘It’s not even seven o’clock.’

‘Yeah, you’re right. I don’t want to see you anymore.’

Tom stepped forward until they were unbearably close. Harry thought he was trying to prove he *would* have to see him and didn’t know if he wanted to laugh or not. His mouth was dry.

‘Is this because of your friends? Have they been telling you how awful I am again?’

‘It’s not them. Are you so self-absorbed? You know, Tom, you can’t just lie and scheme and *try to kill me,* and expect me to forgive you.’

Tom stopped abruptly and a strange expression came over his face. Harry paused, thinking perhaps the words had registered.

But when he spoke, he sounded wondering. ‘You called me Tom.’

Harry blinked. ‘Yeah. It’s your name, isn’t it?’

‘It’s always *Riddle*. You’re so fond of surnames, Harry. So, I ask, why the change?’

‘It’s not a big deal. Just - there’s no point calling you Riddle anymore. It’s kind of stupid.’

‘So, you’ve accepted the inevitable then?’

Harry narrowed his eyes. ‘What’s the inevitable?’

‘Don’t worry about it.’ Tom still had that distracted look on his face but there was a certain gleam in his eye now. ‘Say it again.’

‘What? No!’

‘Harry –’

‘Tom,’ he said, in the same patronising tone.

And Tom smirked, like the complete annoying prat he was.

‘I don’t know anyone else who gets a kick out of their own name,’ Harry muttered.

‘Well, I prefer another name.’

‘What - Thomas?’

Tom scowled. ‘Don’t be disgusting.’

Harry couldn’t help laughing. He forgot how fun it was to annoy him, especially when Tom wanted Harry to call him *Lord Voldemort.*

‘Did you talk to Belinda?’ he asked.

Tom blinked at him. ‘Do we really have to talk about her?’

‘Yeah. Or if you prefer, there’s the *murder attempt.’*

He smiled thinly. ‘At least you’ve recovered.’

Harry glared at him –reminded, once again, of who Tom Riddle was.

‘I’m not going to try and kill you again,’ he finally said.

Harry raised his eyebrows. ‘Until you change your mind and decide I’m a threat. Too bad. I’ll always be a threat.’

‘Reassuring.’

‘I’m not joking.’

‘Neither am I. What do you want, Harry, a promise? Would either of us believe it?’

‘I’m *saying*, you can fuck off. Why would I want to deal with that? With you? When you want to kill me one moment and then –’

‘I like you.’ He said it, as though it was the simplest thing ever. ‘Why would I kill someone I like?’

Harry bristled. ‘When it fades, which it will –’

‘Be quiet.’

He was so surprised he did.

‘I’m not going to try and kill you again, Harry. I don’t have any reason to.’ He paused. ‘That I know of.’

‘Yeah, like you could even if you wanted to.’

He raised his eyebrows but otherwise ignored it. ‘I never knew you spoke Parseltongue. How is that possible? How is it that you somehow have *my* gift?’

Harry didn’t say anything. He imagined Tom thought of him like an exotic animal he had discovered and was excited to see what it could do. But there were a lot of things he didn’t know. Could never know.

‘And do you seriously think I would risk suspicion by attacking you after what happened Belinda?’

That was a good point.

‘You better not expect me to forget about it,’ Harry said, ‘the whole killing thing.’

Tom made an agreeing noise. He looked distracted.

Harry narrowed his eyes. ‘*About* Belinda. Whatever you’re thinking isn’t going to happen.’

‘I found out about your cloak.’

Harry stopped breathing. ‘You – found out what?’

‘Are we still doing this?’ Tom said, ‘playing stupid? I know it’s a deathly hallow. From the fairy tale.’

Harry opened his mouth but nothing came out.

‘A fairy tale,’ he finally managed, voice trembling. This was *bad.*

‘That Grindelwald took too literally.’

‘Does it do anything? How can a cloak *hide you from death*?’ He sounded a bit like Hermione.

‘I don’t know,’ Harry said, ‘it only acts like a cloak. No special features. I didn’t even know it was – *that* until recently.’

Tom cocked his head. ‘Grindelwald clearly believes the tale. He wants the set. The Resurrection Stone, The Invisibility Cloak and the Elder Wand.’

Harry said nothing. His heart was beating so frantically he could hear

it.

‘The Stone,’ Tom continued, and pulled a face. ‘Probably conjures ghosts or some other form of wraith.’

Harry knew he had no interest in bringing back the dead.

‘And the cloak—*hides* from death. Why hide when you can conquer?’

Harry didn’t defend it or question Tom’s ideas. He felt like they were on the edge of a clifftop and a few words away from toppling over.

‘But the Elder Wand.’ A hungry look came over his face. ‘Is actually useful. An unbeatable wand. Can you imagine it?’

‘No,’ Harry said bluntly. ‘No wand is unbeatable.’

‘But if it *was*. If it was the most powerful wand in the world, surely the advantages, the benefits –’

‘I think,’ Harry said, ‘it would be more trouble than it’s worth. Think about it. It has a bloody history. If you owned that wand you would constantly be watching your back. People would be trying to kill you. Steal it while you’re sleeping. Obliviate you, crucio you –’

‘Now this is why I like you, Harry,’ Tom said and smirked, ‘we think so alike.’

‘It’s a hassle. The wand would have you constantly on guard. If the stories are true, it never has one master for long.’

‘You’re forgetting,’ Tom said, ‘who I am. You think someone is going to *dare* take my wand? Lord Voldemort’s? The most powerful wizard alive?’

‘Even if I go along with that ridiculous sentence, you’re not right now. You’re Tom Riddle. Someone could beat you in a duel.’

Tom’s jaw tightened. ‘The wand is *unbeatable.’*

‘It’s a fairy tale!’

‘A fairy tale Grindelwald believes. He wants the Hallows.’ He stopped and a truly horrible look came over his face. Realisation. ‘Grindelwald could already have it.’

Harry laughed nervously. He couldn’t help it: everything was one idea

away from destroying the future.

‘You’re going to duel him, are you? You, a Seventh Year?’

‘Of course not,’ Tom said. ‘I have patience. I’ll wait.’

‘If it’s as unbeatable as you think, you’ll be waiting until his death.’

But Harry knew Dumbledore won the wand from Grindelwald. And Tom wouldn’t dare duel Dumbledore. Wasn’t he the only one he feared? Maybe it was safe.

‘What’s wrong with your wand?’ Harry said, ‘wouldn’t you miss it?’

‘I would. It’s never failed me.’ He took it out, twirling it through his fingers absently. ‘I don’t know why it concerns you. *You* don’t want the Elder Wand.’

Harry made a noise of agreement. He felt cold inside.

I could make Voldemort an even deadlier enemy, he thought. *What if his mother’s sacrifice wouldn’t work against the Elder Wand? What if this destroyed the entire future?*

But another voice argued back: *It’s safe. Dumbledore would rather snap the wand than let Voldemort get his hands on it. Wouldn’t he?*

Your wand’s already interesting,’ Harry said. ‘It’s the brother of mine. Didn’t you say they’re powerful together?’

When Tom spoke, it was in his lecturing voice. ‘Brother wands are very rare. There are few accounts of them working together, as the bearers don’t often meet. However, it’s said when they do cast together, the power increases tenfold.’

Harry tightened his hand around the pocket-watch in his pocket and its presence calmed him slightly. ‘Forget about the Elder Wand for now, and we can test it.’

He looked up sharply. ‘Really?’

‘Yeh.’ Harry knew it was a bad idea but it was the only thing he could think of. If he could distract Tom from the Elder Wand long enough for Dumbledore to win it, then maybe there was hope. And if that meant turning his attention to *Harry* – well it was a small price to pay.

‘I don’t think it will work, though. My wand doesn’t exactly like you.’

'You and your wand aren't separate. The wand is influenced by you, not the other way around.'

'Yeah, well *I* don't like you,' Harry snapped.

Tom ignored him. 'Your wand is the brother of mine. You speak Parseltongue through your connection to *me.'*

Harry stared but Tom was pacing slowly, talking to himself.

'Maybe I'm a descendant of Slytherin.'

He ignored this too. 'And your scar . . . '

'It's always been there.'

'How did you get it? Didn't you say a Dark Wizard cursed you? Can you remember his name?' He looked eager.

'I can't even remember his face,' Harry lied. 'It was just a cutting curse or something.'

'He must have cursed you. But with *what?*'

Harry shrugged. 'I don't remember anything. I was a kid.'

And he knew Tom's question—knew it by his eyes, and the way they lingered—before it even came.

'Can I see it?'

'My scar?'

He smirked. 'No, Harry, your –'

'Yeah, yeah, whatever.' He pulled his fringe out of the way before Tom could finish his sentence, his face heating up. It didn't help that Tom forgot what personal space was as he leaned forward. Harry held his breath.

'Can I –' Tom began, and then decided anyway by lifting his hand.

Harry flinched backwards and Tom paused.

'Habit,' he said, and shivered at the thought of Voldemort in the graveyard.

He braced himself, not knowing why he was allowing this, telling himself it was only to ease Tom's curiosity. And before he had a chance to change his mind and refuse, Tom went ahead and touched his scar.

'Oh,' Harry said. It didn't hurt at all. It felt nice. Pleasant. Warmth going right through him. He involuntarily leaned forward.

Tom traced the scar with his finger. 'How strange,' he murmured. 'I can feel the connection. It feels *alive.*'

Harry jerked backwards and the pleasant feeling disappeared. He felt like he had been doused in cold water now, the words triggering something which made him uneasy.

'That's ridiculous.'

'Oh? That's where you draw the line? You clearly felt it as well.'

Harry said nothing and flattened his fringe. Tom watched him.

'It's my head you're poking. Obviously I did.'

Obviously,' Tom agreed. 'You realise that's the root of everything? The cause.'

Harry swallowed and squashed his panic deep down. Otherwise, it would overwhelm him. He exhaled slowly. Tom didn't know about Voldemort. He didn't know about the future.

'So,' Harry said and licked his lips. Tom had that look on his face: intrigued and excited and *hungry*. 'Is your curiosity satisfied now?'

And Tom laughed.

Chapter End Notes

So, Harry's fallen out with all his friends. I wonder who he's going to have to turn to?

Sorry this one is so late, I'll try and get my update schedule back on track in September. Thanks so much to everyone who is still reading this, I really appreciate it. I hope you enjoyed.

Dark Lord's Descend

Harry hadn't realised how much time he spent with Ron and Hermione until they were gone. It wasn't the same as it had been before, of course. There were still the separate classes, the different common rooms. Still the divide between Gryffindor and Slytherin. But now there was a hole — a gaping, empty hole — in his day and he didn't know what to do.

Harry couldn't turn to Dumbledore even if he wanted to. After their conversation, he had vanished. He was absent at meals, in the halls, and Professor Flitwick had taken over their transfiguration classes. Ever since Dumbledore had given back the time-turner, Harry hadn't caught a glimpse of him.

He wasn't the only one wondering: it had become a popular topic in the common room, especially as the week went on.

But his stomach rolled unpleasantly: Grindelwald was constantly nagging at the back of his mind, along with Dumbledore's sentiment that *he wasn't Harry's problem.*

It wasn't until Saturday evening that Dumbledore came back. Harry entered the Hall along with the other Slytherins, did his regular scan of the Head Table, and froze. Because he was there, all right. Dressed in plain grey robes, talking quietly with Professor Flitwick.

Harry immediately went to his office.

It was quite late. Fawkes, whose feathers were dull and missing in clumps, crooned when Harry came in. Dumbledore looked up. His face was heavily lined and he didn't seem very surprised.

'Sir,' Harry began, 'You don't have to face Grindelwald. Not yet. Or if Belinda's parents are pestering you –'

Dumbledore held up a hand. 'I wasn't contacted about that attack, Harry. Contrary to popular belief, I am not liked by everyone.' He smiled but it didn't reach his eyes.

'So it's him. You're looking for him.'

Fawkes made another noise and Harry turned around. His head was tucked near his wing, but Harry made out one beady eye, watching

him closely.

‘Have I ever told you about my sister?’

Harry turned away from Fawkes instantly. ‘Ariana?’ He winced. ‘No. But – er – in my time, you had a biography written. It was rubbish.’

‘A biography?’ He looked interested. ‘And what was it called?’

‘We don’t want to change the future,’ Harry said hastily.

Dumbledore smiled. ‘That bad, then? Very well, spare an old man’s pride. Ariana. Closer, I’m afraid, to my brother than myself. He works in Hogsmeade.’

Harry tried to school his expression.

‘They were always close. Ariana’s magic was repressed. It manifested in violent outbursts whenever she got slightly emotional. For months at a time, she would have no magic at all, and that, perhaps, was worse. She had a difficult childhood and never attended Hogwarts.’

Harry thought of Rita Skeeter’s writing and nodded.

‘Ariana required almost constant attention and I – freshly out of Hogwarts – left most of it to Aberforth. It was during a fight we had about that very matter, Gellert, Aberforth and myself, that she intervened. My sister was killed.’

He looked away, out the window. Harry felt out of place; an intruder.

‘That was the end of anything I may have had with Gellert. I like to think that it was the beginning of a different path to becoming a better man. I had been fuelled by my own selfishness and forgot what was most important: my family.’

Harry thought of Ron and Hermione and said nothing.

Dumbledore gave a great sigh. ‘You are a far better man than me, Harry, because unlike you I live in the past. My memories – my mistakes – haunt me every day.’

‘You don’t have to defeat him yet,’ Harry said. He wasn’t *meant* to take on Grindelwald yet. None of this was supposed to happen now.

‘Your confidence in my abilities is inspiring. But I will never claim to be a better duellist than Gellert. We have always been equally

matched.'

Harry's mouth opened. It had never occurred to him Dumbledore may not win.

'You're saying –'

'I'm saying it is necessary to take precautions. Only a fool dives into a fight without considering every outcome. And whatever that outcome may be – it is by no means, your fault.'

'You're going to win,' Harry said stubbornly. 'You should wait. Prepare.'

I can't watch him die again.

'Prepare?' He raised his eyebrows. 'I could prepare for the next decade, as could Gellert. What would change, apart from countless deaths?'

Harry said nothing. The air between them said enough. His chest felt heavy. Dumbledore, despite what he said, was challenging Grindelwald for *Harry*.

'I'm proud of you, Harry,' Dumbledore said. 'And honoured to have known you in this short time, although it feels much longer.'

'I've known you longer,' Harry said. 'Even if you don't know it yet.'

Dumbledore looked at him, and for a moment, he seemed sad. 'I do believe you will find a way back home, if that's what you wish. It may not be as soon as you think, or as easy, but your feat of landing here proves that it's possible.'

Harry was too overwhelmed to say anything. He didn't want to blurt out anything embarrassing, tried to remember there was a difference in the Dumbledore *he* knew and the one he did now.

Even if he had come to like them equally.

He didn't have long to think about Dumbledore. As he walked to the dungeons, he was confronted by Tom, who wiped all thoughts from

his head.

‘Why are they still obsessed with this?’ Tom said, stalking over. His eyes seemed to flicker against the candlelight, and Harry, for a moment, blinked at him.

‘Who’s obsessed with what?’

‘The Slytherins.’ He waved a hand, as though dismissing them. ‘All they care about is someone attacking a pureblood. As though that would be the sole reason for concern. It’s pathetic.’

‘They’re bigoted,’ Harry said, ‘and think they’re better than everyone else because of their blood. Like you.’

He scoffed. ‘I’m a descendant of Slytherin. It’s not as though their stupid surnames account for anything.’

‘Yeah, *Riddle*, whatever you say.’

Tom’s face darkened and Harry continued quickly. ‘They’re just titles. They don’t have any more magic or talent or –’ he stopped. ‘You *know* this, don’t you?’

‘Obviously,’ Tom said, ‘but buying into the blood-purity ideology is perhaps the easiest way of gaining power. While the Slytherins may be bigots, they are very adamant ones. Don’t underestimate influence.’

Harry was torn between disgust and disbelief. ‘So you don’t think purebloods are better?’

Of course, Tom didn’t think anyone was better than *him*.

‘What about muggleborns then?’

Tom’s nose wrinkled. ‘Muggleborns are usually ignorant and uneducated about wizarding culture. And muggles – muggles are a disgusting, weak species.’

Harry let out a shaky laugh. ‘Yeah. That sounds like you now. So you’ll just – say whatever if it benefits you?’

He gave Harry an incredulous look. ‘*Yes.*’

‘You just agree with all that pureblood crap? To build a following?’

‘Purebloods are the most influential people in the Wizarding World. In

terms of politics and status, they are vastly superior. *My* Death Eaters will therefore by the best. Agreeing with the sentiment – using it to sway them to my side – is the most beneficial way to gain power.'

'Pick the best people you can find and rule them,' Harry said, shaking his head. 'Makes sense.'

'I am the heir of Slytherin. Therefore*, I* outrank *them.'*

'How impressive,' Harry said flatly.

Tom frowned, his smugness disappearing. 'It impresses everyone else. Unlike you, the Slytherins have respect – have loyalty and pride – for their house.'

'So you speak Parseltongue. I do as well. Excuse me for not jumping in excitement.'

And then an idea occurred to him and he knew, by the way Tom's expression stilled, that he was thinking it as well.

'I wonder what the Slytherins would think if they knew that. Maybe I could convince them I'm the true heir and we would all go and fight dark magic.'

'I would kill you,' Tom said, and sounded so serious that Harry stopped. 'If you ever tried to slander my image.'

'You would try, you mean,' Harry said, and knowing they were going to fight, went on. 'But I won't. I don't like the Slytherins. You can have your little Death-Eaters all to yourself.'

Tom barely reacted. Harry considered that a good sign.

'You know, Harry,' he finally said, tilting his head sideways. 'Parseltongue is classed as a dark trait. You can't exactly *fight dark magic* while using it.'

'Parseltongue doesn't count. It's a *language.* Anyway, it's the intention, not the spell.'

Tom stopped. 'Is that so?' There was a slight smile playing on his lips. 'What about the Killing Curse then? What about a nice, quick, painless death? How can you condone that?'

'Because the Killing Curse is different,' Harry said, more heated this time. 'It's dark for a reason. You have to *want* the person dead to cast

it. It requires a motive.'

'All you really need is to not care about them at all.'

'It's an unforgivable. They're not classed as that for no reason. They require something. Like the Cruciatus. Hatred. You have to *want* it.'

Tom glanced at him. 'Speaking from first-hand experience?'

Harry was caught off-guard for a split second and Tom's eyes widened.

'You *are,*' he breathed, looking like someone had just told him a delicious secret.

'I never said I was some perfect, moral person.' Harry thought of all the curses, all the bitterness, twisted inside him. He wondered, sometimes, what he could do if he was really pushed. 'But I'll never become you.'

'A Dark Lord?'

'You're seventeen.'

'For now. But I will be one day.' He said it so confidently, in such a knowing way, that Harry faltered.

One day.

'I'll have to oppose you then,' Harry said, keeping his voice even.

'Or you could join me.'

Harry stared at him. There wasn't a flicker of humour in those dark eyes. '*No*. You know that would never happen.'

Tom shrugged. 'We'll see when we get there.'

But Harry knew they would never get there, not him and Tom.

'Do you not want power?' he continued, 'at all? Do you want to be ordinary your whole life?'

Harry's lips twisted against his will. 'It sounds nice,' he replied. 'And there are other ways of having power without the mass killing. You could become Minister.'

Tom laughed. ‘How fun that would be,’ he said, ‘sitting in an office and giving statements.’

‘You’ll never be satisfied. Even if you did get what you wanted and ruled the world.’

Tom smirked. ‘And how would you know that?’ His smile grew slowly. ‘I could be satisfied. For now.’ And he reached out and touched Harry’s shoulder.

Harry was too surprised to move backwards.

‘You’re not finding out my secrets. And I’m not turning dark.’ His voice sounded slightly unsteady, slightly surprised.

Tom stared at him, in that sharp, secretive way, and Harry’s stomach rolled, though he wasn’t quite sure why.

‘That wasn’t my intention at all.’

‘I think you need another hobby,’ Harry said, later that day. They were on the way back from the Great Hall and Harry had spent dinner trying to avoid Abraxas, Belinda, Ron, and Hermione. It was becoming ridiculous, and the strained silence had him eating as fast as he could. ‘World domination is well and good but maybe something *healthier.’*

‘Revenge is healthy,’ Tom said, entirely unfazed.

‘On who? The muggles? That’s the same thing.’

He stopped walking and turned to face Harry. ‘What do you propose then?’

Harry hadn’t actually thought of it. ‘Chess?’ he said weakly and Tom scoffed.

‘Chess is a boring game I have no interest in.’

‘Fine, a pet.’

Tom gave him a wry grin. ‘I don’t know about a pet. The last one killed Myrtle.’

Harry let out an unexpected laugh. ‘A harmless pet. Like an owl.’

He gave Harry a dirty look. ‘I have no interest in owls. And I have plenty of hobbies.’

‘Stalking, manipulating, and trying to learn more dark magic don’t count.’

‘And why not? Are you suggesting I play Quidditch? Would that cure my evil ways?’

He grinned. Harry didn’t.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t think there is a cure for you.’

‘What a shame. Really, Harry, you’re so *good* it’s giving me a headache.’

A headache.

‘What,’ Tom said, catching something in Harry’s expression and narrowing his eyes, ‘are you thinking now?’

‘Nothing.’ Harry absently touched his scar. ‘My head . . .’

It hadn’t hurt in quite some time. And a second later, he had a more horrifying realisation. It didn’t hurt around *Tom*.

‘Can I test spells on it?’ Tom said, ‘your scar?’

Harry laughed darkly. ‘You wish.’

But it made sense, didn’t it? When Tom was in a good mood, Harry felt it too. When Voldemort had been angry – experienced any strong emotion – it hurt his scar. But then, Voldemort hated Harry and Tom didn’t.

‘You’re only realising how deep this connection goes,’ Tom said, sounding eager again. ‘You feel it.’

‘Give up,’ Harry said.

‘It’s true though, isn’t it, Harry? Your headaches are caused by it.’

Harry flattened his hair down. ‘You should be freaked out. This isn’t some experiment of yours. You can’t just go from trying to kill me to – *this.*’

Tom ignored him. ‘I haven’t had a dream all week. Have you?’

‘No, but that’s not the point –’

‘I think that when we stop resisting it and stop fighting, it becomes manageable.’

Harry bit back his immediate response which was *I want it gone.* ‘You don’t know that,’ he said. ‘And last time we did, you *tried to kill me*.’

He didn’t defend it, and for that Harry was grateful.

‘Then let’s test it,’ he said simply. ‘Without the murder attempt.’

Harry had no answer to that. It seemed, despite what he did, everything dragged them together anyway.

‘Not fighting isn’t going to work for long,’ he pointed out, ‘and it still seems ridiculous.’

‘We share dreams and wand cores and you can speak Parseltongue. But *this* is where you draw the line?’

Which was, Harry conceded, a fair point.

Things were tense between Harry and Abraxas, and when Harry brought it up, he only seemed to make it worse.

‘Belinda’s forgotten about five minutes of her life,’ he said. ‘So what? It’s not my fault. I tried my best to help her.’ He scowled at the memory.

‘I don’t *care* about the attack. I want to know what you’re hiding.’ Abraxas began to stalk around the dorm, like a restless animal. ‘Both of you. You’re hiding something. And you don’t *get it*. I told her she would be safe. On her – her date! And when my back was turned, you come rushing in – and there’s blood everywhere – and no-one will tell me –’

From his near incoherent ramblings, Harry gathered that Abraxas had probably never seen someone unconscious before.

‘I thought she was dead.’

‘Yeh, but she’s not.’

‘She could have been! And I *know* it wasn’t Grindelwald! I don’t know why you’re covering for him – ‘

‘Covering for who?’ Harry said, startled. ‘Her fiancé? He was with you the entire time.’

‘Her father.’ Abraxas’ voice was quiet and serious, and such a contrast to his rambling before that Harry’s anger faded.

‘That’s not what happened,’ he said. ‘I didn’t even *see* –’

‘You’re hiding something!’ Abraxas burst out. ‘And I deserve to know.’

They stared at each other. Abraxas seemed surprised by his own force.

‘Belinda’s fine,’ Harry said, ‘and if you have a problem with her family, go and bother them.’

Abraxas opened and closed his mouth. He hesitated for a moment, on the verge of speaking, and then left the dorm. The door’s slam echoed after him.

Harry sighed. The room suddenly seemed very empty.

You’re both hiding something.

There was no way he could know. Harry thought of Tom and felt a flicker of unease.

Everything was quieter with Dumbledore gone. The world was a little stiller, a little more tense. The Slytherins all gave each other wary looks and Harry – knowing he was going to face Grindelwald – was constantly on guard. Aware. The air was heavy with the things unsaid, and the looks that went around the common room were cautious and guarded.

Harry looked at Abraxas and then away again.

‘He thinks I’m hiding something from him,’ Harry said quietly. He stared into the emerald flames, watching them flicker and dance and writhe, and Tom said nothing for a moment.

‘He’s going to keep persisting,’ Harry continued. ‘And trying to find out what happened.’

‘Abraxas will stop pushing if he knows what’s good for him. It will *not* be pleasant if he starts asking more questions.’ Tom said it warningly, his voice low and disparaging.

‘Can’t you give them a speech or something? That would keep your Death Eaters in line.’

‘Abraxas will agree with what I tell him to, but he won’t be content until you and he resolve this.’

‘How? I can’t exactly tell him the truth.’

‘You will never tell him the truth,’ Tom said. ‘Getting tangled up with the Lestranges and Malfoys is something to avoid. Their families have been crossed for decades, in matters deeper than blood. And if Abraxas found out, despite how much you believe he’s your friend –’

‘I know, I know.’ Harry looked at him. ‘You’re even more paranoid than me.’

But he wouldn’t tell Abraxas, not now and not ever. It was a secret he kept close to him – and the whole truth something he would take to his death. *No-one* was going to find out.

He looked around the Common Room. Everything seemed tense; still.

Tom’s jaw was clenched. Harry watched the muscle popping in it, and the way he stiffly sat.

‘I still think you should give them a speech.’

Tom looked startled, brows knitting together. ‘I should do *what*?’

‘A speech,’ Harry said. ‘To the Death Eaters. Ease all their concerns and whatever.’ His lips twitched at the indignant look on Tom’s face.

‘I don’t give speeches.’

Harry laughed and Tom’s eyes narrowed.

‘Do you spy on my meetings?’ he said, words soft and laced with venom.

‘You really can’t talk about spying,’ Harry said and laughed again.

Tom looked a mixture of bewildered and cross. ‘So you do,’ he said flatly. ‘If you’re so eager to join the Death Eaters you only had to ask.’

‘I don’t want to join the Death Eaters,’ Harry wrinkled his nose at the very thought. ‘And I don’t spy either.’

‘Is that so?’ He raised his eyebrows.

‘I know you give speeches. It seems exactly like your sort of thing. So do it. Make all this – ‘he waved his hand – ‘unease go away.’

‘I will *talk* to the Death Eaters,’ Tom said finally.

‘Make sure to practice,’ Harry muttered.

He looked at him sharply. ‘What was that?’

‘Practice. The . . . conversation.’

‘I don’t need to practice.’ He scoffed. Maybe it was the fire, but Harry thought there was a flush on his cheekbones.

He couldn’t fight his grin anymore and let it stretch lazily over his face. ‘Whatever you say, Tom.’

He wondered was he treading a line, an invisible one, and didn’t care. ‘Are you sure you don’t want to be Minister? With all your talent for improvisation?’

He thought Tom was going to curse him for a moment. He seemed to consider it, his face going dark and defensive. Harry waited. And then – in that nice, pleasant tone of his – he said, ‘Harry?’

‘What?’

‘Shut up.’

The Common Room was deathly silent the next morning. When Harry came down from the dormitory, he felt his neck prickle. A dozen younger students sat near the windows. They stared at him for a long, strained moment and then looked away.

Harry's unease grew as he left the dungeons. He could hear his footsteps the whole way up the stairs, and only on the ground floor was the stillness broken.

The portraits were chattering loudly. Voices were coming from the Hall, blending together. Harry asked one of the portraits what was going on – a blonde witch stirring a copper cauldron half her height – and she smiled at him. 'You'll see soon enough, dear. Oh, I do hope it's true.'

Unable to wait any longer, Harry pulled open the doors.

The Gryffindor table was abuzz with a hundred voices; the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw ones just as loud. But Slytherin seemed to be brimming with tension.

Harry hesitated before going over. Something about it seemed unnatural, a feeling he couldn't quite get rid of.

As he crossed the Hall, one of the Slytherin's raised their voice, sharp and shrill, and then fell silent.

'The papers should be coming in a moment,' Abraxas said, sitting up sharply. The silence was eerie, broken only by plates and cutlery crashing together.

Harry looked at the sky above. It was misty and grey and revealing absolutely nothing.

'Did you get the evening addition of the Prophet, Harry?' Lucretia said. 'It was only released last night.'

He shook his head and at the same moment, the owls flew in. Everyone stopped. The beating of wings was the only noise to fill the Hall, and the wait was unbearable. Papers fell through the air, students standing up to catch them.

Lucretia was tapping her foot. Abraxas's hawk owl was the first one to reach their table. Behind it came a dozen tawnies.

He leaned forward to see Lucretia's paper but at the same moment,

Belinda gasped and dropped her fork. Harry stared at her wide, scared eyes, and could still hear the clatter in his mind.

‘Here,’ Lucretia said.

Harry was glad he hadn’t eaten. His stomach dropped.

Dark Lord Gellert Grindelwald Defeated by Albus Dumbledore.

The rustling of papers died away. The sudden burst of noise ceased to exist.

Harry couldn’t tear his eyes away from the headline or the picture underneath. The two figures were barely more than pinpricks. He was unable to tell them apart. Something exploded in the foreground of the photo, over and over again.

Harry finally tore his eyes away, ignoring everything: someone scoffing, someone whooping. Tom’s mild voice . . .

He looked towards the Head Table, scanning it almost desperately. But Dumbledore was gone.

With Bated Breath

Harry heard very little except Grindelwald all day. It was the talk of the entire Common Room and several heated discussions had sparked. Lucretia, in particular, was adamant his defeat was a good thing.

'He wanted to expose magic to muggles! It was never *about* purebloods!'

About purebloods or not, it didn't seem to matter. Harry had never seen the Slytherins like this before, divided amongst themselves.

Even in lessons, the professors were discussing it. Harry asked Flitwick about Dumbledore – he was once again covering their Transfiguration class – and he told Harry that Dumbledore was busy dealing with journalists.

'As if he wasn't famous enough.' And he chuckled, patting Harry on the arm.

Harry also ran into Ron and Hermione before lessons began. The corridor was full of students lingering outside classrooms, not bothering to go inside.

'The time-line's changed!' Hermione burst out. 'This wasn't supposed to happen yet!'

'Everything about us being here changes things, Hermione.'

'But now we have definite *proof*.' She looked frazzled and she was carrying a stack of toast in her hands like she hadn't bothered with breakfast and came straight here.

'There's nothing we can do,' Harry said. 'Grindelwald being defeated early—it's a good thing.'

'Yeah, unless Dumbledore loses the plot or something,' Ron said. 'Then how would we get back?'

There was a painful silence. Hermione was watching him with narrowed eyes and Ron's attempt at lightness had done nothing to ease the atmosphere between them.

'He gave me back the time-turner,' Harry said, 'and told me it's not magical anymore. It all ran out when we got here.'

‘Not magical anymore?’ Hermione gaped.

‘Yeah,’ Harry said and found he was unable to look at her. ‘He can’t fix it.’

‘Well, we’ll keep looking. Maybe it needs something to trigger it. A rune, a spell . . . ‘her eyes lit up. ‘Parseltongue.’

‘I tried it.’

Harry watched the hope dim from her eyes and his stomach twisted.

‘He just – gave it back to you?’ Ron said. ‘He’s given up?’

Harry shook his head. ‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

He met Ron’s eye, who glanced away. The seconds ticked on.

‘You’re still talking to Riddle then?’ Ron said.

Hermione looked up sharply.

Harry thought of all the answers he could give, all the ways he could try and explain.

‘Yeah.’

Hermione folded her arms. Almost subconsciously, she and Ron moved closer together.

‘Well, you know what we think of *that,*’ Hermione said and blinked rapidly. Her voice, however, didn’t waver. ‘And you brought it on yourself.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Oh, *come on!* You know he’s baby You-Know-Who,’ Ron said.

‘This isn’t a game, Harry,’ Hermione added. ‘It’s serious. You need to realise what’s at stake.’

And they began to walk away.

Harry wanted to call after them, explain, transfer house, anything. But he stood there, unable to move.

‘And you never apologised!’ Hermione called back.

One of the portraits tittered and Harry told it to piss off. Soon, the whole corridor was scolding him and when he finally tore his attention away, Ron and Hermione were gone.

Harry couldn't help think about Dumbledore. Where was he now? The ministry? It didn't help that everywhere he went someone was talking about Grindelwald. Didn't help when he caught a flash of red hair or brown curls. When he saw yet another Daily Prophet article in the Common Room, its flashing headline mocking him.

In fact, it seemed the only person not interested in talking about Dumbledore was *Tom*.

'The Elder Wand,' he said to Harry, crossing into his path and gesturing him down the charms corridor.

'Rude much?'

'Harry.' He had that gleam in his eye. 'The *Elder Wand.'*

'What about it?'

'If Grindelwald had it – '

'Which you *think* –'

'Then Dumbledore does now. He won it from Grindelwald. The unbeatable wand.'

'I told you it's not unbeatable. It's a children's story.'

'—unless Dumbledore cheated. Or stole the wand – '

'I doubt it.' Harry desperately wondered how he could salvage this. 'Just admit the Elder Wand is only a story.'

'Yes,' Tom said. 'But I still want it.'

The corridor was empty and they no longer had to whisper. 'What's your plan now? Steal it from *Dumbledore?*'

Tom looked affronted. 'Of course not. At least not *yet.*'

He grinned and Harry shook his head.

‘No, Harry,’ he continued, ‘the plan now is to see how many things you’re hiding.’

‘Good luck with that,’ Harry said, ‘because I’m not hiding anything.’

‘We’ll see,’ Tom said.

It sounded like a challenge.

The funny thing was, despite everything, Harry felt better than he had in a long time. His scar no longer hurt. His mind was calm. And he knew it wasn’t healthy, not to depend on someone. Knew it sent off a dozen alarm bells. But the more time Harry spent with Tom, the more *right* everything seemed.

Tom, he knew, agreed with the sentiment, though they never said it aloud. Why else would he spend so much time with Harry? Surely, *surely*, his fascination had died when Harry stopped fighting back?

But it didn’t. Tom still sought out his company and Harry still didn’t resist it.

Tom was a distraction to everything going on. And he desperately needed one.

Harry didn’t have to think about his friends, or about Dumbledore. About the future and how the time-line ahead was now a tangle of events instead of a straight path.

He tried not to look at Ron and Hermione in their shared classes but was unable to help himself. It was a habit: the three of them, always. It had been for so long. And when they would turn away or give him a *look,* it felt just as horrible as it had the first time.

Tom, of course, noticed this. He leaned into Harry’s space one day in Charms, drawing Harry’s eyes away from Ron’s ginger head, and gave him a rather knowing look.

‘Fell out, then? I did wonder why you looked like a dog torn between

two masters.'

Harry turned around sharply and almost whacked into Tom's face. 'Have you ever heard of personal space?' he said, scooting his chair away as his heart raced.

'I can't help it,' Tom said and grinned. 'It's all so *sad.'*

Harry gave him a dirty look. He could tolerate Tom scoffing at his spell-work or disagreeing with his opinions. But Ron and Hermione –

'Don't mention them. They're off-limits.'

Tom raised his eyebrows and Harry waited, anticipating his words before they came.

I don't have limits.

But Tom shrugged. 'You're not the only one with friend trouble. The Slytherins – 'a funny smile crossed his lips and maybe it was at the word *friend*— 'are restless.'

'I don't see why you bother with them. You're the heir, they follow you anyway. And even if they don't, you're going to gather Death Eaters after school.'

What did the seventh years, barely more than a handful, matter?

'*More* Death Eaters, Harry. The Slytherins are merely building blocks to something greater. Many of them will get jobs in the ministry. Their beliefs will pass down to their children. I, of course, will have power over all of them, ingrained from the very beginning.'

It was such a Voldemort thing to say that Harry was silent for a moment.

'What?' Tom said, putting down his wand and letting the protean charm they were practising cancel. 'You don't believe me?'

'No, I do,' Harry said, 'that's the problem.'

He looked at Abraxas across the classroom and the way he was instructing Lucretia's wand-movement. Harry tried to imagine *him* as a Death Eater.

'So, it's your morals then? Is that why you don't want greatness? It's *bad*? You don't have one ounce of ambition – '

‘I’m in the house of the ambitious,’ Harry said.

‘Oh, yes.’ Tom’s mouth curled up. ‘You’re going to be a professional Quidditch player.’

‘Why’s that funny? It’s more realistic than *Dark Lord*.’

‘What’s funny is your lack of enthusiasm for the sport you plan to dedicate your life to.’

‘I’m on the team.’

‘And yet when Abraxas starts talking about it you barely join in.’

‘I like Quidditch,’ Harry insisted. So maybe antique brooms and ancient teams weren’t his favourite thing. ‘What are you doing, spying?’

Tom just looked at him.

‘Stupid question,’ Harry muttered. ‘And anyway, I don’t know about professional Quidditch anymore. I was thinking *Auror*.’

Harry anticipated Tom’s reaction but it never came. ‘Funny,’ he said flatly.

‘It’s the truth.’

‘You want to be an *Auror*?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said, ‘all these dark wizards around me – it’s kickstarted a new ambition.’

He didn’t know why he liked annoying Tom so much: maybe it was the sheer thrill of it, which got his heart racing; maybe it was to see his reaction - an eyeroll, a hidden grin, a burst of sudden, unannounced anger.

Tom, almost thoughtful, shook his head. ‘You’re not doing well enough in potions to become an Auror.’

‘I’m also not joking.’

Harry didn’t want to look at him; couldn’t. He glanced down at the tabletop and the little shaft of sunlight lighting a strip of wood. *Auror*.

Was it even possible?

He didn't know what he wanted anymore. He hadn't thought that far ahead. Had never allowed himself to think of a Voldemort-free future for longer than a few wistful moments.

'I guess we're destined to cross paths again then,' Tom said.

Harry didn't answer.

He dreamed of the Weasleys that night.

He was in the Burrow and the kitchen was packed, a dozen ginger heads shining copper and orange in the sunlight. Mr Weasley had parts of a car engine spread across the patchwork tablecloth and Fred and George were making vegetables race through the air and howling with laughter. Percy was hunched over a piece of paper, his horn-rimmed glasses almost touching it. *Penelope Clearwater,* Harry knew the letter said.

The light from the window was blinding. Brighter and brighter it got, until he shielded his eyes and turned away.

When he looked again, Ginny was there and the kitchen dissolved. Her hair hung around her like a fiery halo and she had that fierce look on her face.

'You didn't forget me, did you, Harry?' She took a step towards him and Harry was overwhelmed by the scent of flowers.

They weren't in the Burrow anymore, weren't in anything but a tangling white mist. He felt dizzy.

'Did you meet any veela on your travels?'

Harry tried to say no but his mouth wouldn't move. The ground under his feet disappeared and he was drifting, in a place with no time or space. There wasn't anything except Ginny. Except mist swirling around them, engulfing them, and Ginny taking a step closer.

'You remember *this*, don't you?'

She leaned forward, tiptoed, and kissed him.

Harry had something to tell her; he knew it desperately. It was something important, perhaps the most important thing in his life.

But he couldn't move.

There was a noise like a train, high and screeching and coming through the mist.

Ginny was beginning to fade in his arms and the bright light was coming back.

Bright, blinding, overwhelming . . .

You didn't forget about me, did you?

Everything was gone apart from those words. They rattled in his head, and Harry tried to grab Ginny's arm even as she flickered out of focus.

You didn't forget about me, did you?

He squeezed his eyes shut.

When he opened them the voice was gone.

He was standing in a cloud of nothingness. The mist had cleared and around him was light, vast and never-ending.

Ginny was gone.

Harry sat up and reached for his glasses. Light was flooding through the gap of his four-poster and everything glowed green. He squinted as the world sharpened. The echo of the noise from his dream was fading, and with it came awareness.

And what a *weird* dream it was.

But it was his. For the first time, in so long, a dream that came solely from his own mind. Harry felt a wave of relief that made him almost giddy. Hopeful.

He pulled his curtains back and hoped Tom hadn't shared the dream.

His bed was empty: curtains tied, neatly made. Harry stared for a moment – in amazement, in gratitude, in disbelief -- and a laugh bubbled in his throat. Rosier's snores quietened.

Maybe you're going mad, Harry thought.

And then –

Ginny.

Harry stopped laughing. The giddy, weightless feeling was replaced by something stifling.

Would he see her again? He hadn't thought of her in weeks.

A few months ago, he used to watch her dot on the marauder's map. Trace it with his finger; a reassuring presence. A comfort. Like a beacon of hope Ginny was. Something *good* in his life. Something to believe in.

His first girlfriend, a part of his mind said. *Did you really think it would last?*

Harry wrenched all the thoughts from his head. He made his way to the bathroom, avoiding Alphard's Quidditch socks and the part of the wood which squeaked.

Not being with Ginny was for the best.

And his traitorous mind said: *she's not even born. It's not like she* misses *you.*

When lessons ended he had Quidditch practice. None of the Slytherins were in a good mood. Abraxas was acting oddly formal, and the others were in the midst of an argument about Grindelwald.

It was raining steadily and the evening sky was black. Harry's glasses had fogged over but he couldn't fix them. His hands were frozen against his broom, which was bucking in the wind. His wand was buried somewhere in his robes, with no chance of retrieving it.

Practice wasn't over until he caught the snitch and Harry wasn't the

only one getting annoyed. Why had Alphard let it out on a night like this anyway?

The sky only got darker, the rain heavier, and the stupid little golden ball was nowhere in sight.

Harry couldn't hear anything against the wind, including the bludgers zooming past. One hit his shoulder so hard his eyes watered, but he still couldn't make out Alphard's whistle – or was it his ringing ears?

When practice finally ended, they trudged back to the castle. The showers hadn't made much difference: Harry felt cold and numb and battered. No-one was in the mood to talk and he wondered was it an acceptable time to go to bed.

The common room – though by no means the warmest part of the castle – had never looked more inviting.

Harry made immediately for the seats beside the fireplace, a habit ingrained into him from his days as a Gryffindor. He was too tired to care that Tom was there; too tired to even grumble at him. He leaned into the fire, putting his hands close to the green flames.

'Hello to you too,' Tom said.

Harry barely glanced up. Alphard had been heading in the same direction as him and stopped when he saw Tom. He moved to sit with Belinda and Walburga, giving them a curious look.

Harry shuffled closer to the fire, and as a result, to Tom.

'Were warming charms not part of your home-schooling?' Tom looked the very opposite of Harry: warm, dry and put-together.

'You know me,' Harry said, 'it was all Quidditch and Defence.'

'A bit of parseltongue here and there.'

He nearly burnt his hand in the flames. 'I didn't *learn* Parseltongue. And I don't like snakes much.' He glanced at the one carved onto the mantelpiece. 'No offence.'

Tom laughed quietly. Harry didn't think he would have heard it if they weren't so close.

'You don't find having an entire species under your control useful?'

‘Not for any decent purposes,’ Harry said.

Tom’s eyes were bright in the firelight, fevered almost, and he had that look on his face – amused, and interested, and just a bit sharp.

Harry’s cheeks flooded with heat and he glanced away. It wasn’t right, he thought. No-one should look like *that*.

‘You have always been able to speak it then?’

‘Yes.’ Harry hoped it was the answer he had given before. His head was muggy. ‘You?’

Tom scoffed. ‘I’m a descendant of Salazar Slytherin.’

‘And you love to remind everyone. Maybe I am too. Why won’t you consider that?’

He looked so unimpressed that Harry snickered.

‘Are you deliberately being elusive?’ Tom said.

‘It’s part of the charm.’

Tom grinned and it was suddenly too much. Too bright, too dazzling, too *real*.

Harry felt defensive. ‘You’re the one who is always scheming and planning,’ he said, tracing the leather chair under his fingers.

‘But I don’t hide the truth.’

You would if I mentioned your horcruxes.

‘Neither do I.’ His mouth was dry. He went on quickly. ‘What about the Chamber of Secrets?’

‘What about it?’

‘Well,’ Harry said, and looked at the people nearby – Third Years playing chess. ‘You got Hagrid expelled for opening it. When it was you.’

‘You’re still going on about *Hagrid*?’ A sneer crossed his face and Harry’s heart started beating wildly; dangerously.

‘If you’re so *honest,*’ he said, ‘then what really happened?’

He leaned forward, and Tom watched him, carefully.

Harry felt like he was holding his breath even though he had no reason to. Even though he was the one asking the question – challenging *Tom* – it didn't feel like it.

'Nothing you couldn't glean from others. The Slytherins all know the truth. And even if you went to your beloved Dumbledore, the school-board are not going to reinvestigate a mudblood's death.'

'Go on then. If you're so confident.'

Tom looked at him, scanned his face and found *something*. Harry didn't know what it was. But, with the gleam more prominent in his eye, Tom began.

Fifth-year he found the Chamber. The Basilisk.

She was sleeping, you see, though rose when I commanded her. There I had my fun . . . she obeyed everything I said . . .

Harry was drawn in, despite himself. Every second he was waiting for something he knew to be a lie. A slip-up. But Tom seemed to *enjoy* telling the story, wherever by the desire to boast or his own arrogance. His voice became alive as he talked, his face lit up, not only by the green flames.

And Harry couldn't look away.

He realised a moment had passed when Tom fell silent.

'Why did you open it then?' Harry cleared his throat. 'Did you not think you would get caught?'

Privately, he thought it was a rather reckless, crazy thing to do.

Tom blinked. 'It was a boring year.'

A boring year.

'A girl died,' Harry said, 'because you had a boring year.'

It was, he supposed, everything he had expected and also everything he hadn't. He hadn't anticipated Tom to be so *bold.*

'I never meant for her to die. Though you can hardly call Myrtle Warren a loss.'

Harry – with extreme effort – managed to shove all his disgust somewhere deep down.

'Have you *met* Myrtle, Harry? She's just as much of a delight dead as she was alive.'

'I know she's a bit – mad,' Harry said. 'But she's dead. And you killed her.'

'I'm very sorry.' Tom shook his head. A smile curved around his lips. 'She guards the Chamber ever so conveniently, however. Like my very own guard dog.'

'Oh, does she? And where would that be?'

Genuine surprise flashed in Tom's eyes and was gone in a second. 'Girls bathroom. The second floor.'

Harry felt too hot. The words registered somewhere in the back of his mind, surprise at the forefront. Tom's face was bright and eager – excited, almost, as he talked about the chamber – and as handsome as ever.

He wanted to get away from the fire and the tight, painful feeling it brought to his chest.

'Maybe I'll put my parseltongue abilities to good use and open it.'

Tom seemed interested, though Harry didn't know how the thought could be appealing. 'I'll show you it,' he said.

Harry's mouth opened. He blinked at him, but there was nothing sinister in his ever-so -nice face; nothing except excitement and that strange, greedy look.

Harry's mind was muddled; hazy. He saw a furrow form between Tom's eyebrows. Stared at it.

'The Basilisk's asleep, you know. And she only answers the heir –'

'Great,' Harry said, shaking his head. 'I don't care.'

Ginny.

She came to him suddenly, a whisper in his mind. How many times had they sat beside a fire so like this one?

Ginny and the Chamber.

Ginny and *Tom*.

Harry felt sick. He stood abruptly and almost toppled. The Common Room was much emptier than before. His whole body prickled; hot like he had a fever.

'I'm going to bed,' he said, ignoring Tom's incredulous look. 'Quidditch was – tiring.'

'That's the lie you're going to use? Really, Harry?'

'Yes. Er – goodnight.'

There was no way of seeing the storm from the dungeons, or feel the rain, but Harry could imagine it all the same. The same way he could imagine Tom's expression as if it seared into his mind.

. . . *Ginny*.

But Ginny brought the sick, clammy feeling back. Harry tried to block them both out. He didn't want to contemplate why she would come to him now.

He passed Abraxas' closed curtains, ignored the sudden drop in temperature in the dorm, dodged the creaking floorboard, and climbed into bed.

Sleep came fitfully.

The dorm was cast in a pale light when Harry woke. He knew it was early, but somehow, he wasn't tired.

He tiptoed out of the room. All the curtains were pulled shut. Alphard's quidditch gear was tossed in a crumpled heap near his bed and Rosier was snoring in a raspy, irregular way.

The common room was bright, even without the low-hanging lamps. A few first-years glanced up at his entrance and after a nudge from a friend, one of them waved and turned a startling red. Harry gave them a grin as he turned away and spotted Belinda, sitting alone and gazing

out at the Lake. It faltered just a bit.

He considered walking straight through and ignoring her. It was what every nerve in his body urged him to do.

He squared his shoulders and walked over. At the very least, talking to her would get rid of the nervous, guilty feeling he had. The feeling something was *wrong.*

'So,' he said, sitting down in one of the chairs and finding he didn't know how to finish the sentence. She was twisting the ring on her finger – large, glittering and quite ugly – as though it was stuck.

'How're you?'

She looked up. Stopped twisting.

There was a copy of the daily prophet on the table beside them – the addition which announced Grindelwald's defeat.

Harry thought of the way her fork had dropped that day in the Hall. The *surprise* flashing through her eyes.

And he looked at her now: guarded and watchful. Careful.

. . . she refused to have her mind read . . . accepted the story Harry and Tom gave her . . . never asked any questions or prodded . . .

'I'm fine,' she said. 'Yourself?'

Harry nodded. Absently. 'Remember much?'

Was it his imagination or did her eyes widen?

'I'm afraid not. Though I have been asked about a thousand times.'

Harry knew the feeling perfectly. 'Grindelwald,' he said and her hands went still. 'What do you think about his defeat?'

Everyone knew Belinda's family were his loyalist supporters. There was no reason Harry shouldn't too.

'It's not a good thing for us. Though I doubt father will be in any trouble. It's not like they can shut down the shop.'

'The shop?'

‘The apothecary. In Knockturn Alley.’

They were both testing each other now, tense and bated.

She owns a potions store.

‘Have you been talking to Abraxas?’ Harry said suddenly.

Belinda shrugged. ‘I’m sorry he’s angry at you. He blames himself.’

‘He blames me.’

‘He feels helpless. Didn’t you hear? He thinks we’re hiding something.’

Harry didn’t join in with her laughter. Abraxas’ words came back to him.

You’re both hiding something.

He hadn’t meant Tom at all.

It was just another piece of evidence, another clue, for his list.

‘He needs to loosen up,’ Harry said.

Belinda looked at him. Unaware of the slow, steady certainty building in his mind.

‘We grew up together,’ she said, ‘neither of our parents were nice but they were close. As a result, we were too. Abraxas thought he could protect me.’ She laughed. ‘The only way to do that would be killing them.’

‘And would you? Kill them?’

‘No!’ Her lips parted. Her voice turned cold. ‘Just because –’

‘Because what?’

‘Because they’re not nice people. I wouldn’t kill someone for no reason.’

Harry thought he wasn’t cut out for this Slytherin way: vagueness and half-answers. Gleaning slithers of truth from the unspoken and forming a picture.

He looked at her – jaw tense, eyes careful – and said, ‘what if you had a really good reason? If you wanted something. Badly. Would you kill them?’

Her face, for a split second, was an open book. It would have been comical if Harry didn’t feel so afraid.

‘If I wanted – what?’

Harry raised his eyebrows. She kept her puzzled expression.

‘I know you remember,’ he said.

‘Remember what? If you’re on about that day, there’s no need to worry –’

No need to worry.

She would not say that unless . . . unless she was afraid of his reaction.

‘What would you do, Belinda?’

‘I would – ah – not do anything.’ She shrank backwards in her chair and gazed at the newspaper between them. ‘Grindelwald’s in prison. He won’t be a help to anyone now.’

Harry let out a slow breath.

Could he trust her? Trust she wouldn’t do anything?

Or would he always have to be watchful? Spend sleepless nights wondering about his possessions and the information she possessed?

‘If someone *did* remember, they wouldn’t *do* anything.’ Her mouth twisted into a bitter smile. ‘Do you want me to swear an unbreakable vow?’

‘No,’ Harry said immediately. ‘I want to know why the memory charm didn’t work.’

‘You see this ring?’ And she held out her hand, showing what he often stared at. ‘It’s an heirloom. About the only thing I own that’s actually useful. Countless protection charms. The spell bounced right off.’

Harry swallowed.

‘It can only be taken off willingly. The ring. If that’s your plan –’

‘It’s not.’ He paused. ‘Does that mean your mind’s safe? From Legilimency?’

‘To an extent. It’s not perfect, of course.’

And Harry knew there were other ways of getting information. And the information she had – the things she knew . . .

‘Would you make a vow,’ he said slowly, ‘not an unbreakable one. But –’

‘Something to make sure my tongue doesn’t slip?’

The worse thing was that she didn’t look surprised. She seemed resigned.

They sat there for a moment.

‘What will you do then?’ Harry said. ‘If Grindelwald can’t help you.’

‘Nothing. I’ll marry Arnoldo.’

‘So, you won’t – won’t turn to –’

Tom.

She seemed to read his mind. ‘What influence does Tom Riddle have over my family? Nothing.’

It was too dangerous. Grindelwald was out of the picture. What if she turned her hopes back to the next, budding dark lord? Bought back into his promises of power and protection?

The thought of Tom finding out *anything* made Harry numb.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to do this.’

Nothing in her face revealed surprise. He knew, with certainty, not many things would stir a reaction from Belinda anymore.

Help her, Harry. Isn’t that what you do best? Trust her.

But he had too much trust; he was already walking an invisible line with Tom. Adding to it wasn’t only dangerous, it was suicide.

Harry met her eyes and ignored the guilty feeling in his stomach.

‘About that vow . . .’

The Chamber of Secrets

The only good thing about Belinda's revelation was that it took away Harry's thoughts of Tom. Any awkwardness he had vanished. He was too distracted to dwell on his feelings or the spike of fear they generated.

He went straight to Hermione and Ron. The argument still hung between them, making the interaction stiff and cold. Hermione's voice was oddly formal. Ron kept shooting Harry betrayed, disbelieving looks.

For now, they ignored all this. There were more important things.

'I know you don't want to,' Ron said, 'but Belinda won't go spilling secrets if she swears an unbreakable vow. Otherwise, she'll run straight back to Riddle or her parents. What if she decides telling everyone about time-travel will get her out of her marriage?'

Harry hadn't thought of that. Hermione didn't look like she had either.

'I don't know how it would work,' she said, 'but her ring is fascinating. It must be really rare. I've read about them — you wouldn't be able to buy them in a shop.'

'It's an heirloom,' Harry said.

'Shame we can't get a few,' Ron muttered.

'I think,' Harry began slowly, 'the fact she was *willing* to swear an unbreakable vow . . . I think she's being genuine.'

They gave him flat looks.

'She has been scheming right under your nose for months!' Hermione said. 'Would you *know* if she was being genuine?'

That was a fair point.

Hermione knew a lot about different types of vows. 'I researched it last year,' she said, 'as an extra credit essay.'

Ron did, too . . .

'Bill deals with them a lot. It's part of curse-breaking. The problem is,

if they're not unbreakable it's possible to resist them. You can go and get them broken.'

They spent a while reading books. Harry found a vow from the fifteenth century. 'You lose a tooth,' he read, 'every time you think about telling the secret.'

'That's horrific!' Hermione exclaimed.

'It's also a load of rubbish,' Ron said. 'They're triggered by *words*, not thoughts.'

Both their heads were bent over books; Hermione was leaning into Ron to read what he was looking at. Harry, who sat on the other side of the table, glanced away.

'I was also trying to find out more about time-travel,' Hermione said.

'Since Dumbledore's fucked off,' Ron muttered.

A twisted part of Harry agreed. 'What did you find?' he said.

She had that look about her, balls of her feet twitching, ready to jump from her seat. 'We're looking at it wrong.'

Harry cast Muffliato, even though the library was empty. They all leaned forward.

'No one has travelled into the future before,' Hermione said, 'so we're not going to find anything in books. However, if we trace back everything that happened in the vault . . . '

'I picked it up,' Harry said, wracking his brain. 'I felt as if – I was drawn to it.'

'Like a horcrux,' she said triumphantly.

'It's not a horcrux.'

'Like one. I mean, you felt compelled by it. What happened when you picked it up?'

'It was warm. And the hands began to spin, round and round.'

'We went to see it,' Ron said, 'and when we all touched it —'

'A huge flash of light,' Hermione finished. 'Stronger than any portkey.

The amount of magic used in that moment —'

'Burned it out, didn't it?' Ron said.

'The *point* is that a tremendous amount of magical power sent us here —'

'And a tremendous amount will send us back,' Ron exclaimed. 'Brilliant!'

Harry didn't share their excitement. 'It's still broken,' he said. 'And anyway, what would we cast? It would take more than three stunners or a few blasting hexes.'

'I know it would,' Hermione said. 'It would take something huge. But what if – '

She bit her lip. 'What if Dumbledore suspected something like this? What if the answer is in the snitch?'

Harry held his breath. Could it be?

Dumbledore had told them nothing; had left them with so little information their horcrux search could have taken years.

'The deluminator,' Ron said. 'He knew I would leave. It brought me back.' His face brightened. 'What if it can bring us all back?'

Hermione beamed. Harry's stomach gave a little tug. Hope, that was what it was. He felt hopeful.

'Let's go and get it then,' Ron said. 'It's in my dorm, hang on . . . ' He rose from the table and rushed out of the library.

Harry and Hermione sat there in silence for a moment.

Hermione had deep purple circles under her eyes and her face was pallid. Harry thought she looked as bad as she did in third-year, when she was overwhelmed with work.

'Hermione,' he began gently.

She looked at him. Her lips wobbled.

'I'm really sorry. For being an arse. You've done all this work and I've — '

What had he done? Talked to Tom? Spent time joking around? Joking about things like murder?

'I've done nothing.'

'That's not true. You've been very busy, Harry. I know it must be hard in Slytherin. And you have to deal with Riddle. Ron and I don't. And you were nearly killed about a dozen times —'she took a deep breath. 'You haven't done nothing. Belinda cornering you wasn't your fault.'

'Well, I shouldn't have been such a prick to you. You're right, you know. I just — '

'You just what?'

'I dunno. Slytherin – it's weird. Different.'

He could tell she was trying to resist prying. Things weren't truly back to the way they were. Would they ever be?

Ron hurried back into the library, red in the face as if he had sprinted the flights of stairs. 'Found it,' he panted. 'Stupid thing . . . it was in your bag, Hermione.'

Harry raised his eyebrows but didn't comment about Hermione's bag being in Ron's dorm — they weren't quite at that stage of friendship again yet.

'Oh, great,' Hermione said.

Ron took the deluminator from his pocket and set it on the desk between them. They all leaned forward to look. It was like a small, silver cigarette lighter, not a device to transport them fifty years through time.

'What do we do, then?' Harry said.

Ron picked up the deluminator. 'It worked when I heard Hermione say my name. I clicked it and there was a blueish light outside. So I followed it and it went inside me. I disapparated and it took me to the hill.' He cleared his throat. *'Bellatrix Lestrange's vault.'*

The light above their heads disappeared. In a second, it sucked into the deluminator and the table was doused in darkness.

'What on *earth*?' the librarian said, moving through the shelves towards them.

Ron clicked it again and the light reappeared.

She stopped when she reached their table, staring around. 'What — did the lights just flicker?'

'I think it was your imagination,' Ron said casually.

Her eyes turned to the deluminator. 'What's *that*?'

Ron looked flummoxed.

'My lighter,' Harry said. 'You know, for smoking.'

'Smoking?'

'It's a muggle thing.'

She scrutinized him for one long moment. 'Very well. Be quiet, please.'

They waited until she had gone back to the desk at the front of the library.

'Wizards don't smoke then?' Harry said. Ron asked what smoking was, which launched Hermione into a long-winded explanation.

'Anyway.' Harry cleared his throat pointedly. 'That didn't work.'

'You said the little ball of light went *inside* you?' Hermione said to Ron.

'Yeah. And I apparated.'

'I don't see any light,' Harry said.

'You can't apparate through time,' Hermione said. She lifted the deluminator but didn't click it.

'Take us home,' she said.

Harry and Ron shared an incredulous look.

'Take us to 1998.'

Nothing happened.

They each had a turn trying: it didn't react to Parseltongue, or any key phrases they could remember from that day.

'Bellatrix Lestrange,' Hermione said, as though talking into a phone.

'This is ridiculous,' Ron finally said and shoved it into his pocket.

Harry agreed. He recast Muffliato, glancing carefully around.

'There's always the snitch,' Hermione said.

Harry shook his head. 'The resurrection stone is in it.'

'You don't know for sure. It's a theory.'

'It's a feeling.'

And Harry was almost certain of it. What else could it be?

'I open at the close,' Hermione mused. 'I was looking at it yesterday —'

'What?'

She blinked. 'You told Ron and me to look after your stuff, remember?'

'I didn't mean — '

The snitch was *his*.

'Anyway,' she continued, 'if we crack that, it could be a clue.'

Harry doubted it. They had been in the library so long his stomach growled and his feet itched to move.

'I still think we should fix things,' Ron said. 'We kill Riddle and save a few thousand lives.'

'He has two horcruxes,' Harry said, 'which he keeps on him. '

'And we can't get basilisk venom easily either,' Hermione said.

Ron swore under his breath. Harry was feeling glum. He traced his fingertips against the rough wooden tabletop and said, 'at least we know Ravenclaw's diadem is a horcrux.'

Ron and Hermione shared a look.

'Yeah,' Ron said. 'You sure that's not going to change? Riddle knows you overheard his conversation.'

Harry shrugged. 'Everything's going to change. The longer we're here

the harder it will be to get back.'

Hermione was chewing her lip. Every couple of seconds she glanced up, refraining from saying something.

Harry felt the familiar, weighing feeling of hopelessness.

'Anyway, Harry,' she eventually said. 'You sure you're okay with the vow?'

He ran a hand over his forehead.

Would they ever be able to go back?

Would there be anything to go back to?

'Yeah,' he said. 'It'll be fine.'

Without the weight of serious conversations, things went back to prickly between Harry, Ron, and Hermione. The stiffness came back, the palpable tension lingering between them.

It wasn't *Harry's* fault he was talking to Tom when Ron glanced over in Potions. *He* hadn't asked Slughorn to seat them together.

All day, Harry watched Belinda from the corner of his eye. He waited for the moment she would slip away alone, a letter in her hands, to the owlery. She never even glanced at him.

They performed the vow in an empty classroom. Belinda hadn't batted an eye about Ron and Hermione being there, or expressed any displeasure about the 'mudblood' grabbing her arm. Silent and solemn the entire time, she listened to their conditions without reacting.

'. . . which means you can't even *hint* to anyone about time-travel,' Ron said firmly. 'No writing it down, no showing memories, no putting ideas in their head . . . '

A brisk nod.

'And forget about the cloak. No sneaking around, no looking at it . . . 'He narrowed his eyes, unnerved by her blank gaze. 'I mean it,

Lestrange, if you so much as breath one word of our business to anyone, Grindelwald will look like a puffskein.'

'I get it, Weasley.' She released Harry's hand and his whole arm vibrated from the confirmation of the vow. 'I *can't* anyway.'

The implication hung in the air. With several dirty looks and warnings, Ron and Hermione left the classroom.

Harry studied the floor under his feet.

'Pleasant, aren't they?' Belinda said.

'Don't. They're right. Don't try and get around the vow or —'

'Do you think I'm mental? What would be the point?'

'Desperation?'

Her lips thinned. 'No one gives a shit about you anymore, Harry. Do you think your secrets matter that much?'

'I never said —'

'You thought it.'

They went back to the common room in tense silence. Belinda muttered the password—*grindylows*—and stalked through. Immediately, she went over to Walburga Black, no longer interested in him.

Abraxas, however, was.

Wringing his hands together, he walked over. Harry noticed a smudge of green paint on his cheek and waited for him to speak.

'Harry,' he said finally. 'Can we be friends again? I apologise about — questioning you. It's not your fault what happened in Hogsmeade.'

Harry didn't hesitate. 'Sure,' he said. 'Of course we can.'

Abraxas sighed in relief. 'Great. But— 'he rubbed a hand over his face. 'The thing you're hiding — is it serious?'

Harry stilled. 'I'm not hiding anything.'

There was a moment of silence and Abraxas shook his head. 'Alright,'

he said. He was fiddling with his paint-dotted hands so much it was distracting. ‘See you at practice then.’

Harry suppressed a sigh as he walked off.

He couldn’t tell Abraxas.

He couldn’t tell anyone.

‘Let’s go to the chamber,’ Harry said.

He studied Tom’s reaction and itched to know what was going on inside his mind. To understand his motives; his thoughts. How far could he push Tom’s nice act before it fell apart? How long until he got tired of Harry and turned his interests elsewhere?

Tom’s eyes narrowed. ‘Very well. I’ll indulge you. Only because there’s nothing left down there which I haven’t explored. And make no mistake, Harry, what the consequences will be if anyone hears about it.’

‘Yeah, I know. You can have your beloved chamber.’

He was thinking of the basilisk fangs which could destroy Tom’s horcruxes. If he went into the chamber, he would know if there was any chance of getting the venom.

And then you’d have to kill him.

Wasn’t that the plan?

‘You will meet lovely Myrtle, of course,’ Tom said. ‘Though she can’t see where we’re going.’

Why the second thoughts?

They left the Common Room and walked through the quiet halls. Harry thought of Myrtle and the casual way Tom spoke of her. A girl he murdered.

‘You don’t feel guilty, do you?’

Tom's eyes barely flickered. 'Not that I'm aware of. Explain, again, why I would want to?'

Harry shrugged. He knew Tom had no desire to be good, or normal, or even human. It wasn't as if he could *fix* it either.

What did that make him, Harry thought, if he knew all the horrible things Tom had done and still liked him?

'Having regrets?'

Harry blinked. 'About the chamber?'

'You won't see the basilisk.'

This hadn't occurred to Harry. 'Yeah, if I did, I'd die. Then you'd be bored and have no one to stalk.'

'I don't *stalk* –'

Harry made a disbelieving noise.

When they reached the third floor, Tom cast a furtive look around. They waited until a few of the third-years had passed and entered the bathroom.

A ghost floated through the nearest cubicle. Myrtle, identical as always, with her Hogwarts robes, straggly hair and thick glasses. For the first time, Harry noticed her age. She couldn't have been older than fourteen.

'Who's there?' She sniffed. 'Came to have a laugh, I suppose?'

Then she froze. Behind the frames, her eyes were comically wide. '*Boys?* This is a girls' bathroom.'

'Hello, Myrtle,' Tom said.

Myrtle turned a dark silver. She adjusted her glasses and patted a frizzy lump of hair. 'Tom Riddle?' Her voice was higher and less weepy. 'You caught the killer! *My* killer!'

Harry gaped.

'Anything for a fellow student,' Tom said. 'I'm only sorry I couldn't have caught him sooner.'

‘You’re so noble.’ She scratched a large pimple on her chin, coiling her hair around her fingers.

So good at acting noble, more like.

It was a moment before her eyes fell on Harry. ‘Oh! You’re the *new* boy, aren’t you? I’ve heard lots about you, Harry Potter. And I saw you play. You were very good.’

Harry didn’t ask how she had seen him play – he imagined she would start crying about bathroom windows and insensitivity.

‘Have you heard of me?’ she said hopefully.

‘Yeah,’ Harry lied. ‘Everyone thinks it’s really sad what happened.’

Her small eyes narrowed. ‘You must hear differently to me. *Ugly* Myrtle is what I hear. Fat Myrtle! No one cares I died. All they care is that Myrtle’s in the Ravenclaw Common Room even though she’s banned! That Myrtle’s *scaring first-years*!’

Harry let out an unexpected laugh and disguised it as a coughing fit. Myrtle’s eyes narrowed further.

‘You must have different company to us then, Myrtle,’ Tom said.

Myrtle giggled. ‘Oh! If you’re new then you haven’t heard what happened to me. The whole story. Unless – did you?’

‘No,’ Harry said. ‘Tell me exactly how you died.'

He looked at Tom who was smirking. ‘Yes. Tell Harry who’s responsible.’

‘Olive Hornby! She was making fun of my glasses. Because of course, her eyes are so *perfect*. I bet she wouldn’t make fun of yours, would she, Harry? No, because you’re not Moaning Myrtle. Olive Hornby and her gang of friends used to torment me. *I* follow her now. And there are no friends left!’

‘A monster killed you though, didn’t it?’ Harry said.

Myrtle didn’t hear. ‘She thinks she can hide! But anywhere in the castle, I can find her! Myrtle can go through any wall! Olive Hornby thought she was so *clever*. So *witty*. You haven’t seen her around, have you?’

‘Er –’

‘I think I saw her on the Seventh Floor,’ Tom said, ‘and she called you a very unpleasant name.’

‘Oh, did she now? Wait here – I’ll be back in a moment. After I make her cry!’

She let out a shriek of laughter and glided past them, through the door. They listened until the echoes died away.

‘Lovely girl, don’t you think?’ Tom said.

‘Dippet can’t let her haunt a student.’

‘Myrtle is adamant to haunt Olive Hornby until her death. The ministry was called in last year.’

'And what did they do?’

‘They told Hornby to move schools. Dumbledore refused to get Myrtle banished.' Tom moved towards the sinks and hunched down. There was a puddle of water which he ignored.

‘If you’re really a parselmouth you should be able to open the chamber,’ he said.

‘You don’t think I am?’

‘I think all of this should be impossible.’ Tom looked excited. Knelt in water beside a broken sink in a girls’ bathroom. As though someone had given him a present.

Harry sighed and knelt beside him. ‘What do I do then?’

‘Tell the snake to open the chamber.’ He pointed one long finger towards the copper tap.

Harry felt the reassuring weight of his wand in his pocket and breathed in. He had expected Tom to change his mind at the last moment. But Tom didn’t look scared or cautious. He still had that eager, excited look on his face.

‘Hurry up.’ He pointing to the snake again.

‘Open,’ Harry hissed.

The tap began to spin. There was a great creak as the sink moved, downwards and out of sight. The pipe underneath lay exposed, wide and dark, its opening coated in a thin layer of dust.

'I never imagined Slytherin was fond of slides,' Harry said. He stared down the tunnel, hypnotized.

'It's convenient for the basilisk.'

'Are there swings too?'

'There is a roundabout and a see-saw,' Tom said, 'it's how he lured the muggleborns down.'

'Well, with an offer that tempting of course it worked. Once they got over the dark, creepy pipe.'

'Afraid now, are we?'

Harry raised his eyebrows. 'Terrified. You'll have to hold my hand.'

Tom smirked. 'I'm afraid the pipe doesn't fit two, dear. You'll have to settle for being caught at the bottom.'

'Tempting,' Harry said, 'but I'll manage.' He moved to the edge of the pipe and stared down.

Tom's words from a month ago came to him. *It's so deep under the castle the wards aren't triggered.*

Uncertainty set in. He didn't know the chamber like Tom did, who would be in his element. *Who controlled the basilisk.* He had an image of landing at the bottom, greeted by a pair of yellow eyes.

Harry pushed himself down before he changed his mind. The journey seemed to go on forever. The pipe twisted and turned, far below the castle, in an endless chasm of darkness. At last, he saw a sliver of light and it levelled out.

He landed hard on his feet, stumbling and crunching on something underfoot. Lighting his wand against the thick gloom, he saw it was bones. His senses prickled. It was much better to joke about the chamber with Tom in Myrtle's bathroom than be there.

He shone his wand around.

Was he crazy?

But if he found the Basilisk, sleeping . . .

He could come back and blind it. Steal a few of its fangs and destroy the horcruxes.It would end all attempts at being nice with Tom. It would end everything between them and declare open war. Could he really do that?

Tom would notice if his horcruxes went missing. He would *know*.

Harry looked up the shoot he had arrived from. The chamber air was stale in his throat and he knew, bitterly, that he wouldn't touch the horcruxes at all.

The pipe creaked and he took a step backwards. Seconds later, Tom appeared. Harry had been preparing to laugh at his landing but unlike Harry, he didn't stumble. He slowed his fall as he reached the bottom and gently touched the ground.

'Pleasant journey?' he said, eyes lingering on Harry's hair.

Harry scowled at his falsely innocent tone. 'You couldn't have mentioned that spell?'

'And spoil the fun? It's not my fault basic spells don't occur to you.'

'Want to see what spells occur to me now?'

'Expelliarmus?' Tom grinned. 'Don't you want to see the chamber?'

Harry put his hands in his pockets. 'Sure,' he said, hoping his voice didn't reveal his trepidation.

Tom strode forward, wand lit. Harry did the same.

'The bones were always here, right?'

'No, Harry, I committed mass murder in fifth-year. *Really*?'

'It doesn't seem too far-fetched.'

He only shrugged. They walked through the passageway until Harry felt water under his feet.

'What the –' He shone his wand down. 'I think the chamber's flooded.'

Tom wrinkled his nose. 'The disadvantage of an ancient chamber. No plumbing.'

They went on, through the passages, reaching a wall with two carved snakes. Harry paused. This was it. Here he had gone on alone, without Ron.

'*Open*,' Tom hissed.

The wall cracked open and slid out of sight. Holding his breath, Harry went through.

They had reached the chamber. Despite the puddles of water underneath, it was different from how it had been in second year. He hadn't looked around properly, not in his panic. Now the dust was thinner and the pillars weren't cracked and covered in mildew. Even the air felt cleaner.

Harry looked past the carved snakes, to the huge statue of Salazar Slytherin.

'He built a statue of himself,' he said. 'In a private chamber that only he could access.'

Tom sniffed. 'No one said modesty was one of his attributes.' He smiled wryly. 'Nor looks.'

Harry snorted. He had always thought Slytherin looked like a monkey and was surprised Tom agreed. *'You're* the descendant,' he said.

'And the family resemblance is uncanny. Wouldn't you agree?' He stepped into Harry's light.

'I see the same superior attitude.'

His smile broadened. 'No, then.'

Harry's breath hitched as he realised his mistake. Tom was very close, so close his insides froze and he couldn't look away.

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'No?'

Harry couldn't think clearly. He felt Tom's breath near his face and stilled, unable to move.

'Do you find me attractive, Harry?'

Harry watched his lips part as he spoke. His finger ghosted over

Harry's mouth, pressing down lightly. The idea of shoving him away barely crossed his mind. It was unappealing, insignificant, not worth considering.

'Still no,' he said.

Tom's eyes glinted. A challenge.

Harry stayed still. He didn't know what was wrong with him. He couldn't back down. Not now.

Tom leaned forward. Their faces were close enough to touch. One inch and his nose would brush Harry's cheek. One fraction. Harry didn't dare move or think or even exhale.

'Oh?' Tom said softly. 'What a shame.'

He moved backwards, quick as anything, the hand which was curling around Harry's chin gone.

Harry gaped at him for a second, foolish and dizzy from the loss of contact. 'What the hell?'

Had he imagined the expression on Tom's face? Or was he always composed and at ease, lips curling in faint amusement?

'What the hell *what*?'

Harry flushed. 'Nothing. Er –' He cleared his throat and looked around. 'What's so great about this stupid chamber anyway?'

He could feel Tom's eyes on him and glanced at the ceiling, so high it was swathed in blackness.

'Apart from a basilisk?'

'It's called the Chamber of Secrets. *Plural.'*

'Well, there's a library. A few torture chambers, of course.'

'Torture chambers?'

'For the mudbloods. They're full of skeletons and chains. Some scratches on the walls.'

He shook his head at Harry's disturbed expression. 'I'm *joking*.'

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. He couldn't concentrate. It was taking supreme effort to keep the conversation normal. To *act* normal. All he could see was Tom's face, the warmth of his breath against his own, the way his mouth was slightly parted –

'What's in the library? Books on dark magic?'

Harry did not find Tom attractive. Whatever mind game he was playing, it wouldn't work.

'Yes. And a few of Slytherin's old diaries. They're barely readable.'

Was that why he had decided to keep a diary of his own? To copy Slytherin, the greatest of Hogwarts' four?

'But the main advantage of the chamber,' Tom continued, 'is the seclusion.'

'What's not to love?' Harry said. 'Just you, bones, and a fifty-foot snake.'

'She is about fifty feet.' Tom sounded surprised.

Harry cursed his slip-up. What was wrong with him today?

As he looked around –deliberately keeping Tom in the corner of his eye—he realised why he came to the chamber. It wasn't the horcruxes. It wasn't curiosity. It was because he wanted *proof*.

Proof of everything Tom had done. Every despicable thing. Proof so overwhelming, so staggering, that he couldn't deny it.

Faced with the truth, Harry could no longer delude himself. No longer still like him.

Still want him.

He had killed Myrtle. Sixteen-year-old Tom in the diary had opened the chamber again and drained Ginny's life-force. Harry looked to where he had found her lying. Small, her red hair spread around like blood. Her too-large robes.

He saw the frozen, petrified bodies of the students. The basilisk trying to kill him. Fawkes pecking out its eyes. His own tightly shut.

He wanted to remember and he did.

It was undeniable as he stared at the head of Slytherin and imagined the basilisk coming out. As he heard the steady drip of water in the green gloom.

But the horrors weren't as fresh as he thought. He looked to where Ginny had been and couldn't see her clearly. Was it that spot or was it a metre to the right? The left?

He didn't feel sick, or horrified, or gripped by disgust.

That wasn't this *Tom.*

He would still do it. He had made the diary for that very purpose.

But not to you.

'The Basilisk's asleep,' Tom said.

Harry jumped at the sound of his voice.

'Behind the face.'

The mouth had opened and it had slithered out. Harry ran, tripping and stumbling, eyes closed. But the memory was distant. He wasn't twelve anymore.

'Doesn't it starve?' he said.

Tom shook his head. 'She's asleep. They don't get hungry until they're awake. Which will be –'

'Never?'

'Unless the Chamber opens again.'

By your diary.

'You think another heir of Slytherin will do the same thing?'

Tom's jaw tightened. 'If so, the school will close. And someone will get *my* credit.'

Harry knew he was barely resisting mentioning the diary.

God, what was wrong with him?

'I've never shown anyone the chamber before,' Tom said abruptly.

‘I feel honoured,’ Harry said.

‘You should. And since I have, do you not believe it’s time we are honest with each other?’

Harry chewed his lip. What did *that* mean?

‘What do you want to know?’

‘I want to know what you did before you arrived at Hogwarts.’

Harry’s heart quickened. He should have recognised it as a trap.

‘Nothing great,’ he said. ‘I was home-schooled. Orphaned as a baby and lived with the Weasleys. Not very interesting.’

‘I disagree. Your memories are certainly . . . interesting.’

‘You mean the *dreams?*’

He nodded.

‘Did you ever think they’re just, you know, dreams?’

‘Imaginary? Are your ginger girlfriend and your godfather also figments of your imagination?’

‘You’re reading too much into it. I had a godfather who died. Then I had the Weasleys. Grindelwald killed them.’

‘And the girlfriend?’

'Why do you care?’

He grinned. ‘Defensive again, aren’t we?’

‘Fine,’ Harry said. ‘Ron’s sister.’

Tom’s face flickered for a moment. Then he looked gleeful. ‘Really? How incestual.’

Harry frowned before he remembered his story that the Weasleys' adopted him. ‘She wasn’t my actual sister. In fact, she wasn’t like my sister at all. That’s Hermione.’

Tom’s face twisted in distaste. Harry thought it would be best not to mention Hermione or Ginny again.

‘Why would Grindelwald target a pureblood family?’ Tom said.

‘We weren’t targeted. We got caught in the fighting and – ‘he took a breath. ‘They died. It wasn’t a fun childhood. It was *shit*. Is that what you want to hear?’

‘You’re saying the Weasleys deliberately endangered themselves acting like heroes? Saving muggles, I assume?’

‘It’s not something you would understand.’

His lips quirked. ‘No,’ he agreed. ‘Explain your scar then. How does it add to this . . . tale?’

‘It’s not a tale. I got it when I was a lot younger. Which I *already told you.* A dark wizard –’

‘Hit you with an unknown curse. Yes, I see. Still delightfully vague. Anything else?’

‘No, that’s pretty much it.’

Tom grinned. ‘You know, Harry, you possibly *reek* of suspicion.’

‘And you reek of manipulation. Do you do anything without an ulterior motive?’

‘Not usually. However, exceptions are always made. Some things I do simply because I *want* to.’

‘You get everything you want then?’ Harry said.

His mind was one loud hum.

He wouldn’t. He couldn’t. He wanted.

‘Yes.’

Harry forced his feet to take a step backwards.

Come on, Harry. You can’t. That’s another level of stupid.

‘Ever heard of personal space?’

Tom smiled wickedly. ‘Are you saying you don’t enjoy it?’

Harry scoffed. ‘Clearly *you* do.’

He made himself think of Voldemort. Of high laughter and green light and a face unlike Tom's.

'You'll give in soon, Harry. I know you want to.'

'I know you're mad.'

'I always get what I want.'

His voice was smug and knowing and Harry finally looked up. 'Shouldn't you have a few more answers then? Win a few more fights?'

'Shouldn't you realise just how much you're lying to yourself?'

Bones on the ground. Large, yellow eyes.

Get it together, Harry.

'You're ridiculous,' he said. 'And as fun as this has been, let's go.'

'Fun?' Tom said. His smile was all teeth. 'I'd call it *enlightening.*'

As they walked back – through the puddles and animal bones and bits of crumbled stone – Harry knew that, somehow, things had gotten even more dangerous.

Tension

The next couple of days, things were normal. Tom was back to his ordinary behaviour and Harry wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed. He felt *strange*. He was fighting with his mind more than ever. Even the urge to stay away from Ginny was nothing like this. It was physical. Insistent. And unlike Ginny, Tom didn't mean the disapproval of six Weasley brothers. That, now, seemed laughable by comparison.

He didn't dare let it linger in his mind for long. The second quidditch match of the year was coming up: Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff. While not playing, the team trained as hard as ever. Harry didn't mind – it provided a welcome distraction from everything going on. The nights grew darker, practice interrupted by wind and hail. Professor Kettleburn, the Care of Magical Creatures professor, was growing pumpkins for Halloween.

With Halloween looming came a startling revelation: Harry had almost been here two months. Two months and so many things were different. Grindelwald was defeated. The wizarding war hadn't begun. And Dumbledore . . . Dumbledore was *alive.*

Harry focused on the school-work, practiced quidditch, revelled in the ordinariness of it, the sheer routine. It was easy to slip into work and Hogwarts' life. Comforting in a way.

When Dumbledore came back to the castle the next week, everyone treated him like a celebrity. Even the Slytherins couldn't resist gawking and whispering. Students craned their necks; stood on tiptoes. Harry heard a few of the younger ones talking about autographs.

'Do you think he's going to say something?' Lucretia asked Harry. It was the first morning they had spotted him at the head table and the hall was abuzz with noise.

'I doubt it,' Harry said, snagging the teapot from beside Abraxas and ignoring how everyone turned to listen. 'He's already given his statements to the paper. And it doesn't have anything to do with Hogwarts.'

Much to their disappointment, he was right. Dumbledore did not mention defeating Grindelwald in transfiguration or go into great

lengths about the duel. They continued their lesson on conjuring from the air, creating as many mice as they could by the end of the class.

Nobody was focusing. Some of the Hufflepuffs had set their wands down, chatting. The Slytherins were constantly glancing around, expecting Dumbledore to materialise behind them.

It took one of the Hufflepuff girls to ask the question. 'Sir?' she said, in a timid, eager voice. 'How *did* you defeat Grindelwald?'

The hush died down. Everyone looked around in interest.

If Dumbledore was affected by the question, he didn't show it. 'By a bout of good fortune. One I'm sure you've heard all about in the prophet.'

She settled back, disappointed, and the talk started again. Harry couldn't help it now. He was curious too.

He scanned Dumbledore's face for some sign of discomfort but found nothing. He didn't look anything like before: tired and withdrawn, in those plain grey robes. Now Dumbledore's smile was easy, and his eyes sparkled in that familiar, assured way. He looked back to normal.

He had defeated the Dark Lord. Did the impossible. And yet Harry couldn't do anything about Tom. He told himself it was a problem of the future, a problem of his time, not this one. Put it off, and off, and really, who was he fooling?

Dumbledore had put his success down to *fortune*. Luck. Dumbledore didn't know how to send them back. Had all the answers except this time. How was he supposed to defeat Voldemort when it was all so vague? Harry had trusted blindly. Relied on hope that Dumbledore knew something. But what if Dumbledore had left it to hope and luck and didn't have the answers at all?

The bell eventually rang and the class trickled out. For a moment, Harry lingered behind, slowly packing his bag. He looked at Dumbledore and shouldered it, moving into the crowded corridor.

These things he could forget about if he tried hard enough. The problems of the future, the spikes of fear it brought. The bone-deep uncertainty. The nights disturbed by phantom laughter and Ginny's accusing eyes.

Some of it, though, was inevitable. Especially as Harry tried to act

casual around Tom. They were partners in Herbology, now that Harry and Abraxas weren't talking. Most of the time he didn't mind. Tom breezed through the class, as he did with everything, and tending the man-eating trees wasn't as hard as it sounded. They worked easily together; the greenhouses far more relaxed than the dungeons.

'You know, Harry,' Tom said. He didn't bother lowering his voice, not with the shrieks and swears and laughter all around.

'What?' Harry tore his eyes away from the swaying branches. They were blanketing the trees, as the weather dropped, but keeping them still for more than a moment proved impossible.

'You said that if I didn't pursue the Elder Wand you would test our wand connection.'

'Our – you're still on about that?' He stepped away from the tree, knowing he wouldn't be able to concentrate and would likely lose a finger. 'You're not going to go after the wand,' he said, 'because Dumbledore has it. We both know you can't defeat Dumbledore.'

Tom didn't react. He bound several of the tree branches with a delicate wave and turned around. 'I could steal it. Vanish. I already have everything I need here. Dumbledore would never find me.'

'You wouldn't. You're not powerful enough.'

Tom's magic seemed to spark the air. Harry wanted to take a step back but didn't.

'It would be madness,' he said.

Tom laughed, cold and humourless and promising deadly things. 'Shall I test it then? When the old fool's asleep? Or maybe one day in class I'll get dear Abraxas to provide a distraction. You can even *help*.'

Harry scoffed. He didn't want to challenge Tom, he wanted to obliviate every thought of the Elder Wand from his mind. 'You're too arrogant,' he said.

'And you promised. Or was that another lie? Shall I add it to the list? Saintly Potter, not who he appears?'

'I told you, not everything is a lie. Normal people – we don't do that.'

'You're not *normal*.'

He had that gleam in his eye and Harry sighed. It was only some spells. He only had to prove it wasn't anything spectacular and hope Tom was satisfied.

'Fine. Saintly Potter will do it.'

'I can practically see the halo.' Tom smiled, pleased and genuine, and Harry turned back to the tree, insides constricting.

They managed to finish before anyone else and Professor Beery told them to head back to the castle.

'We don't mind helping out,' Tom said, in his charming professor voice.

'Yeah, and *I'm* the liar,' Harry muttered.

They headed back to the castle. Tom's *Head Boy* badge gleamed in the sunlight, his head raised.

'I don't see why you bother,' Harry said, 'pretend you care about the students and the professors. Why try when you're changing your name to *Voldemort*? No-one will remember Tom Riddle anyway.'

'You have a problem with Lord Voldemort?'

Harry shrugged. 'I'll never call you it anyway.'

'People will remember *Tom Riddle* as a polite, talented student.' Tom said his own name with contempt. `No one will connect him to Lord Voldemort.'

'You say it like they're two separate people. It's a *name*. It doesn't mean anything.'

'It's a disgusting muggle name.'

'And your little cult doesn't care. *Riddle* could strike the same amount of fear Voldemort does.' He shook his head. 'Never mind. Call yourself 'great evil one' for all I care.'

'That doesn't exactly have the same ring to it, Harry.'

'Really? I think it's quite catchy.'

They pushed open the front doors and went inside. Tom paused, expression flickering in excitement. 'Defence classroom,' he said,

‘seven o’clock. Professor Merrythought will allow us to use it.’

Harry’s stomach tightened. ‘Alright,’ he said, trying to keep his voice casual. ‘But prepare to be disappointed.’

Tom asked Professor Merrythought to keep the classroom open and she did so without question. At seven o’clock they left the Common Room, passed Peeves who was dropping water balloons on fourth-years, and reached the third-floor. Tom pulled the classroom door open and the candles flickered to life.

It was silent, apart from a door at the front which rattled. Both their eyes went to it. That was where Professor Merrythought kept the practice dummies.

‘Hasn’t the charm worn off by now?’ Harry said, as the door gave another rattle.

Tom shrugged, immediately stepping forward. Harry saw the moment an idea came into his head, as his eyes lingered on the locked door.

‘What about the wands then?’ Harry said. ‘Wanna duel?’

The look Tom gave made Harry’s skin prickle. ‘Well,’ he began, turning away from the door. ‘Wandlore is not the most popular topic in the library. I only found two books that gave enough detail, both in the restricted section. There are four main recorded accounts of brother wands acting together. The first one was between the warlocks Mathias Burke and Roland Macmillan in battle. They experienced that same ‘chain’ of magic and were unable to harm each other.’

Tom smirked. ‘However, they weren’t the most civilised pair. You see, Burke got so agitated he snapped his wand in half and tried to beat Macmillan with it like a sword.’

‘How muggle of him,’ Harry said. ‘What about the others?’

‘1856, a pair of conjoined twins had wands made from the same wood, ash, and with the same core — a diricawl feather. Sadly, the boys were little more than squibs and apart from one feat of

apparition, performed no recorded magic.'

Tom listed off the facts carelessly, counting on his fingers. 'Chadwick and Webster Boot, raised by Isolt Sayre the founder of Ilvermorny, both had serpent horn cores. Many times, the power of their spells increased by casting together.'

'I bet they didn't obsess over it though,' Harry muttered.

Tom ignored him. 'Finally, a couple. Muggleborns, both of them. Very eccentric, both self-proclaimed seers. They used to swap wands and all that rubbish. However, like the Boot brothers, their power increased tenfold when casting together.'

Harry raised his eyebrows. 'You really think *our* wands will work together? When all you want to cast are unforgivables?'

'I think we're *very* compatible, Harry.'

Tom smirked at the look on his face. Harry felt his cheeks flood with heat and scowled.

'Whatever you say. Let's blast these dummies and see if there's any *unique powerful magic.*'

Tom ignored his mocking words. With a wave of his wand, the door creaked open. Harry braced himself, wand ready.

He saw a sliver of light. A hand appearing in the gap, prising it further. And a dummy was running out, stumbling, half its face missing, a mixture of leather and fluff and clumsy stitching. Behind it came two more.

And then Tom waved his wand and the door slammed shut.

'Aren't they great?' he said.

The first dummy reached them and Harry blasted it backwards. It hit the wall, lay motionless for five seconds, and began to stir.

Tom had watched him cast the spell carefully. 'The next one,' he said, as it began to move through the desks, shoving them out of the way. 'Do that again only at the same time as me. Right—'

The dummy climbed over the final desk. It was moving in a stiff, jerky manner as though the enchantments were wearing off.

Harry saw Tom raise his wand and immediately cast the same spell. Two beams of blue light met the dummy at once. It flew through the air and hit the wall behind. Harry winced at how loud the noise was, hoping no-one was passing through the halls.

Tom looked disappointed. ‘That was average at best.’

‘Maybe your sources are exaggerated,’ Harry said and sent the final dummy hurling through the air.

But Tom didn’t say anything, still had that disappointed look on his face.

‘Oh, well,’ Harry said, ‘I guess we’re not compatible, after all. What a *shame*.’

‘Or maybe,’ Tom said, ‘the spell needs a genuine threat. A moment of danger.’

Harry scoffed. Tom looked at him and grinned.

He waved his wand. The door creaked open and the remaining dummies ran out. Harry forgot about Tom’s pleased expression, the tightening in his chest. He focused on the dummies coming near, with their jerky limbs and waving arms.

One lifted a table and threw it through the air. Tom sent it spinning back, straight into the group, scattering them like bowling pins. Harry, who was watching how graceful his spell-work was with a mixture of admiration and envy, didn’t notice one sneak up until it grabbed the back of his robes.

‘Stupefy!’

There were three more reaching towards him. Harry took a step backwards.

‘Stupefy!’ Two of them scattered. The final one grabbed his robes again, making a swinging movement —

‘Sectumsempra!’

Before his eyes, it slashed into ribbons. He stared for a second, seeing the mutilated face, the exploded stitching. A head hanging by a piece of fluff. He imagined blood and guts instead.

‘That’s not a cutting curse,’ Tom said, looking interested. ‘It feels

dark.'

'You can't actually feel it,' Harry said and a chair came careening through the air.

They both reacted at once, casting shields.

The chair hit against it and exploded. Splinters showered through the air, pieces flying in every direction. Harry froze where he was, transfixed by the shield which materialised before them. It was a thick, shimmering wall of gold, seemingly solid.

He could *feel* it, even though he had laughed at Tom's declaration moments ago. Feel the magic as though it was flowing through him, light and sparkling and strong —

'You just cast protego?' Tom murmured.

'Yeah.'

There was no shield like it: it seemed more like a wall. The dummies on the other side were hazy; another chair collided with the shield and disappeared.

Tom's eyebrows furrowed. 'Hold it,' he said, 'while I cast something.'

'While you —'

Tom was firing a flurry of curses before he could ask, all in the span of a few seconds —acid green and sizzling yellow; black and midnight blue. They hit the shield in quick succession.

The force of the spells went through Harry's wand arm, but the shield never wavered. Like the chair, the spells didn't bounce backwards or fizzle away. They disappeared.

Harry grit his teeth, as Tom cast a dozen more spells. All, he knew, dark. Causing the air to vibrate, the force of it going straight through his arm. It was only after several moments — the dummies on the other side were clawing and kicking and throwing furniture —it began to strain.

Tom cast something that made a hissing noise, creating a deep crack in the wall of gold. Harry lowered his wand, instinctively covering his eyes. The shield exploded in a shower of white light.

When he opened them, Tom was standing where the shield had been,

one hand in the air, wild and dazed and dishevelled. When Harry tore his eyes away, he saw the dummies were on the ground in pieces.

'I wanted to cast an unforgivable,' Tom said, 'but you can't, of course, only in the chamber.'

Harry stared. The classroom was a wreck. Smashed desks, legs flung around. Chairs collapsed. Splinters and wood littering the floor. Sawdust floating through the air.

'I cast a silencing spell,' Tom said, seeming to know Harry's train of thought.

'Great. That will solve everything.' He laughed, unable to help himself, staring at the wreckage. 'This doesn't mean anything, you know.'

Adrenaline was still surging through his body. Harry was dazed, and excited, and oddly *happy*.

'Of course it does. That wasn't a normal shield. Didn't you see how strong it was?*One* of those spells would have shattered an ordinary shield.'

'Maybe I'm really good at shields,' Harry said.

'Maybe.' Tom turned around. His eyes were bright, hair hanging in his face.

Harry swallowed, glancing down.

And then Tom said, 'if the power of a shield is heightened, it should be the same for a curse. I wonder how much —'

'I'm not making your unforgivables stronger,' Harry snapped. 'That's what you want, isn't it? A super-powered killing curse?'

'Surely you want to see what will happen.'

Harry laughed. 'I was right. You're delusional.'

'You won't cast a dark spell on a *dummy*. Are you afraid?'

Harry started to splutter but Tom continued. 'Afraid you'll like it too much? Be unable to control yourself?'

'I can control myself.'

Tom actually laughed. ‘Can you? We can cast — what was it? Sectumsempra?’

‘No. What’s the point anyway? We have the same wand cores. They work together. Why does it matter? We’re not going to use this and *fight together.’*

‘I wouldn’t be so sure.’ Tom must have seen something on Harry’s face. ‘I know you’re against the idea of being a Death-Eater. You mention it often enough. Afraid you’ll forget yourself?’

‘I’m not just against it,’ Harry said, ‘I’m opposing it. You know that, right? When you go around killing people and calling yourself Voldemort?’

Tom didn’t look bothered and Harry’s stomach gave another twist. He didn’t *care.*

‘Then consider it a Hogwarts thing,’ Tom said. ‘An experiment until I figure out why. After, we’ll go our separate ways.’ His lips quirked. ‘And I’ll have the Elder Wand.’

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘There’s more chance of me sprouting wings than you getting the wand from Dumbledore. He would rather snap it than let that happen.’

‘No, he wouldn’t,’ Tom said. ‘I’d say he’s as taken with it as Grindelwald was. Snapping something that valuable?’

Harry thought he kept his face still. But Tom was so near, it was unfair. He was watching Harry, picking up the slightest reaction.

His eyes widened. ‘Dumbledore is taken with it. The same as Grindelwald. My, my, is our beloved professor not who he appears?’

‘You don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Don’t I?’ Tom smiled, like all the pieces were clicking together. ‘Perhaps you’ll enlighten me.’

Harry felt on the verge of panic. Everything inside him was contracting, everything dazed and disoriented, and flickering by so fast —

‘Perhaps you should stop making random guesses.’

'Harry.’ Tom said his name, in a drawn-out, familiar way. ‘Protect your

precious professor. He is not my concern. In fact I don't care about Albus Dumbledore at all.'

'Only me, then?' Harry said, 'Harry Potter, your mystery of the month?'

'You don't have a clue, do you? When I think I have you figured out, it gets more interesting.'

'I'm quite a boring bloke, really.'

Tom grinned. Harry couldn't help but notice how much better he looked up close. When that gaze was focused on *Harry*.

'There's not much to figure out,' he muttered.

'I disagree.'

How did he always end up in these situations? Was it his fault? Harry knew he shouldn't like it. He really, really shouldn't.

And a part of him hated Tom, hated him so much his entire body felt hot and dizzy. Hated his stupid ego, and twisted ideas of fun —

'You're so conflicted,' Tom breathed.

Tell him to piss off. Do it. Move away.

'It's wonderful to watch. Tell me, Harry, how much strain does this have on your pure little heart?'

'Piss off.'

'Conflicted,' Tom said again, as if this was the most fascinating thing ever.

'I'm not.'

'I wonder what your friends think. Is that why you fell out? Was it over me?'

He was so self-centred, Harry thought, watching his mouth move. His lovely lips part. So arrogant.

'You would love that, wouldn't you,' Harry said, 'if everything was about you.'

‘It basically is. Does it scare them? The two of us in Slytherin? Are they afraid you’ll be corrupted? You’ll forget about being *good*, now you’re a Slytherin?’

Harry exhaled sharply. He should punch him. Tom was definitely close enough to punch. His fist colliding with his face; the *noise* it would make. And the feeling, searing through his knuckles.

‘Do they not trust you, Harry?’

'I said they were off limits.’ Harry clenched his jaw, heart thudding.

‘And I don’t have limits.’ Tom’s smile was sharp. ‘You do though. They shouldn't worry at all because you’d never go against your beliefs. You wouldn't *dare*.’

It was a game. It was a trick. But Tom was getting him riled up — he couldn't think with the blood rushing in his ears. How Harry hated him right now, and everything he said. *Knowingly*.

'Poor Granger and Weasley don't know half the things you get up to. What would they think?'

'Stop talking about them.'

'Would they hate you? Or would they just be *disappointed?*' His face was perfectly wicked.

Harry didn't give him the satisfaction of an answer. Let Tom talk — let him talk, and talk, and Harry could block it out. Could grab his wand, step back.

'Or does it come down to you?’ Tom breathed. ‘You never would, Harry, because you're *afraid*. You're afraid of yourself. You can’t even *look* at me. Are you so easily influenced? So controlled by your friends?’

Harry's heart was pounding. He had to shut him up. It wasn’t true, none of it. And Tom needed to *shut up*.

‘Afraid of —’

Harry grabbed the front of his robes and pulled him forward. Their faces knocked together painfully. There was a nose, and glasses, and Tom made a surprised noise, his sentence cutting off.

Harry kissed him, fog overtaking his brain. His fingers fisted in Tom’s

robes. He ignored the warmth of his lips, how they adjusted into place, how it was needy and frantic and right. Tom seemed to smile against his mouth.

‘You’re such a piece of shit —’ Harry gasped.

They were kissing again. Tom’s hands curling around his jaw. Harry tugged his robes harder, lips moving against Tom’s, intent on bruising. He felt fingers at his hair. The sting of pain. He bit down on Tom’s lip and tasted something metallic. Tom yanked his hair. Hard.

Harry groaned against his mouth, felt Tom’s hips pressed against his own, their bodies flush together. His head was swimming. There was Tom and only Tom, who was insufferable and horrible and —

He pulled away, both of them breathing harshly. He looked down at his hands, clenched in Tom's robes, and let go. Stepped back.

‘That . . .’

Harry fell silent and looked at him. Tom’s hair was a bit rumpled, eyes dark. His gaze flickered to his lips —redder than usual and curled in satisfaction. He took another step.

'Fuck. I don't —’

It was the proximity. The spells. The adrenaline. Tom getting him riled up, taunting him —

'Shit.'

Harry ran a hand through his hair, determined not to think about how much *he* wanted it.

And what the hell? Tom wasn't a girl. He wasn’t Ginny. He wasn’t even *nice*.

‘Will you fuck off now, then? You got what you wanted.’

Tom raised his eyebrows. He wasn’t Ginny, not at all.

Harry’s breathing quickened. It came to him then. Startling and more vivid than anything before. He wasn't Ginny. Wasn’t Tom.

Voldemort.

Gone were the handsome features, the carefully crafted face. He was a

monster. Chalk skin and scarlet eyes. Instead of a straight nose, there was none at all. A stretched waxy face, gleaming like bone. And a high, rattling voice which made the back of his neck prickle.

Harry couldn't breathe. He backed away, tripping, bile rising in his throat.

Voldemort. That's who it was.

Voldemort rising from the cauldron.

Voldemort, around a long table, with figures in masks and dark robes.

Voldemort whispering in his mind.

. . . *Harry.*

It was gone as quickly as it had come. Tom was watching him, head tilted, calculating.

Harry breathed out raggedly. He left the classroom, closed the door, and realised, dimly, that his hands were shaking.

Utterly Meaningless

Harry was determined not to think of Tom even if his body betrayed him. His mind - he could control his mind, couldn't he? Months of Occlumency, Snape's words—*clear your mind, Potter*—like a drum in his head. He went back to the Common Room and realised he didn't want to be there at all. Standing outside the entrance, he tried to clear his muggy head. He would never –ever—speak of this again.

The entrance opened and Harry jumped back.

'What the –' Belinda began, *'Merlin,* Harry.'

'What?'

Her eyes lingered on him for a moment and she let out a sudden breath of laughter. 'Who have you been shagging?'

'No-one!'

She made a doubtful noise. 'Suit yourself. But maybe you should find a mirror.'

He didn't find a mirror. He walked, not sure where he was going, intent on moving, the corridors merging together. It didn't seem like time was passing, not when his chest was constricting and his pulse banging in his ears. When his legs moved of their own accord, fuelled by an insatiable itch.

Harry drew to a halt. Stared at the portrait in front of him and she stared back.

'What are you doing up here, lad?' the Fat Lady said. 'Nothing to see here.' She crossed her arms over her chest, eyeing him mistrustfully.

A lump rose in his throat. He tried to speak but the seconds ticked on and her face became more and more annoyed.

'Shoo. Go on.'

Harry turned away.

He managed to avoid Tom that evening and went to bed without talking to any of the others. He rolled over, shoved his head between the two pillows and fell into a fitful sleep.

Clear your mind.

But Harry dreamt, dreams truly his own. Of a low voice in his ear and lips insistently pressed against his. Teeth that just grazed the surface of his skin, pressing down enough to break it. Of dark eyes and long, slender fingers – of *Harry, Harry, Harry* – and friction so intense it woke him, painfully hard.

He tried to think of Ginny, only Ginny didn't do it anymore. Ginny wasn't *him.* She was nice and funny and good. With loud laughter and bold, fumbling hands, and a mouth that tasted sweet; freckles he could kiss on her neck and shoulders and . . .

Harry thought of Ginny and the flowery scent of her perfume, the slide of her tongue against his, her curtain of red hair. But when he came with a low groan it was to Tom’s grin and his gleaming eyes, flashing red, both cruel and bright. And even in his mind, Tom was *laughing.*

Harry waited until the dorm was empty before going to breakfast. Belinda made space on the Slytherin bench for him and Abraxas, across, was making guilty eyes.

'Ready for the charms test?' was all he said and Harry shrugged, reaching for the teapot in the middle of the table.

Charms they shared with Gryffindor, which meant a desk with Ron and Hermione. A part of Harry hoped Flitwick would split up the seats for the test. When they reached the classroom there was no such luck.

'Ok, everyone, quills out,' Flitwick said, from his podium of books. He waved his hand and a couple dozen sheets of parchment floated towards them. 'Mr. Avery, do you seriously think I'll let you use that quill?'

The class snickered and Avery, flushing a dark pink, shoved his quill into his bag.

'Now,' Flitwick said, clearing his throat. 'This should give you some indication of your NEWT score and how much study you should be doing. We have a lot of work to cover and plenty of time so never fear. Very well –'

The parchment unrolled. Hermione made a squeaking noise and tied her hair up. A second later her quill was flying. Ron and Harry looked at each other and shook their heads. Feeling immensely better now his friends were still talking to him, Harry looked down at the first question.

Explain, in detail, three disadvantages of the bubble-head charm and suggest suitable solutions.

Harry thought of the Triwizard Tournament and Voldemort and the feeling of the grindylows pulling him down. As he wrote, the noise of quills filled the room. Ron, on Harry's left, spilled his inkpot and swore under his breath. Hermione had already written at least six feet of parchment and had a thin sheen of sweat on her forehead. Harry looked back down.

Explain the creation of the disillusionment charm in the 17th century and how its use has changed over time.

He rubbed his head. The quill-scratching was starting to get distracting and the questions he had done before never required so much thought. He had to be careful not to talk about its uses past the 1940s. He looked at Ron, who was in a similar stump. And then looked around the classroom, hoping to gain some inspiration.

Abraxas was doodling in the corner of his parchment. Belinda was writing steadily. Avery and Rosier were whispering down the back. Avery pointed at Flitwick and they both snickered. And Tom –

Tom looked up when he saw Harry, paused for one moment, and grinned.

Harry heard a snap and looked away. His quill, which he had been pressing into the desk, had split.

'Hermione?'

Hermione didn't look up from her paper, instead pressed her nose

closer to it.

'Do you have a spare quill, Hermione?'

‘Hmm?’

‘A *quill.’*

‘I don’t know, Harry,’ she snapped, ‘check my bag.’ She was writing again.

Harry reached for her bag under the table and tried to look like he wasn't cheating. Flitwick didn't glance his way, but one of the Gryffindor girls gave him a dirty look.

'Here, mate,' Ron said, shoving a quill over.

How has the use of the disillusionment charm changed throughout time?

Hermione was frowning faintly at her paper; Ron was rubbing his nose and leaving an ink stain behind. The scratch of writing throughout the class was distracting. The timer on Flitwick's desk tittered, 'ten minutes!' making Hermione jump.

Harry looked at Tom again, but he was writing. He turned to the window instead.

He's just attractive, he thought. That's all.

Then he turned back to his paper, wrote down a few sentences and went to the next question.

Which wizard is widely renowned as the creator of the memory charm?

In the corridor, Hermione was anxiously talking about the test. *How many points did you give for question five? I only had time to get about four in, I hope Flitwick wasn’t expecting more. My conclusion was weak for memory charms, too, most of our textbooks were based from the fifties onwards when the advancements were made. I thought question nine was very nice.*

Neither Harry nor Ron were listening.

'It's only a class test,' Harry said absently, mind still elsewhere.

'Only – it may as well have been a mock NEWT!'

'Our NEWTs don't matter here.'

There was an uncomfortable silence no-one wanted to broach.

'Well, at least you didn't snap a quill like Harry,' Ron said, clearing his throat. 'Poor bloke. Too busy staring out the window.'

Harry didn't say anything. He didn't imagine Ron would like what he was actually distracted by, and said, while watching two portraits fight, 'do you think I can really defeat Voldemort?'

Hermione stopped talking about the test.

Ron froze. 'Course,' he said, 'Dumbledore believed it, didn't he?'

'The same Dumbledore who can't get us back.'

'It's not the same Dumbledore,' Hermione said, 'our Dumbledore had decades more knowledge and experience. Maybe –' She too fell silent.

'Does seem impossible, doesn't it?' Ron said, 'after we get the horcruxes – if we ever get them—then what? He's only *You-Know-Who*.'

Harry didn't know if he could beat *Tom* in a fair fight. What about Voldemort with fifty years more knowledge?

'You've always trusted Dumbledore,' Hermione said, 'but if you think now –'

'I trust him,' Harry said, 'but he overestimated me.'

They said nothing. He saw Ron and Hermione share another look.

'No-one said you had to do it alone,' said Ron. 'Once the horcruxes are gone we can inform the Order. They can –'

'*If* we get back,' Harry said, 'how long will it take, do you reckon? Until we invent a new time-turner or break into the Department of Mysteries –'

'We're *going* to go back,' Ron said. It wasn't the firmness of his voice that made Harry pause, but the desperation. 'We have to.'

‘Yeah,’ Harry agreed weakly, and then he couldn’t look at them, not anymore. All he saw were clock hands, frozen, heard a ticking in his ears; Tom’s face thoughtful and expectant, Harry’s hands still clenched in his robes.

‘I have to see my family again,’ Ron said, ‘they can’t not exist. I — I *can’t*.’

Hermione glanced at Harry quickly. ‘Of course,’ she echoed. Her voice was very small.

Harry practically ran from Ron and Hermione when the bell rang for Transfiguration. The weight of his secrets seemed to hang between them, ready to come out at any moment and ruin things forever. He came to a halt outside the classroom and the Hufflepuffs and Slytherins both turned to look.

‘Harry,’ Tom said, eyebrows raised. ‘Why so — *dishevelled*?’

Harry wanted to look away, not answer. ‘Why so nosy?’ he found himself saying.

‘You weren’t *avoiding* this class, were you?’

‘I was in the library.’

‘Really? *You*?’

Harry scowled at him and the door opened and Dumbledore called them inside.

‘Please get into pairs. We’re going to go over human transfiguration, which I know most of you still find challenging. It’s a large and complex branch of magic we have barely scratched the surface on. However, today we’re moving away from our own faces and onto someone else's. Yes, Mr. Abbott, you’re transfiguring one of your classmates.’

Everyone shared looks and Dumbledore continued, amused. ‘Do try and make them look as ludicrous as you can. I’ll give twenty house points each to my favourite pair.’

Everyone started talking when he said that and stayed close to their separate houses. Harry glanced at Tom, who he usually sat beside and then away. There was absolutely no way Harry was letting him near his face with a wand.

'Belinda,' he said immediately, giving her a silent look. Her face flickered – surprise, caution – and when she came over, it was with a knowing look.

'Well, Harry,' she said, 'you want to go first?'

He nodded gratefully. Tom, who was with Abraxas, frowned at him in annoyance; Abraxas looked terrified.

Harry and Belinda found two desks and as he studied her face, they settled into silence. Harry was too busy thinking about how not to permanently disfigure something than feel awkward.

'How do you feel about beards?' he said.

'Love them. You may as well do my hair too.'

'That seems a bit ambitious – what if it doesn't reverse?'

'Merlin, *who cares*. It's fine.'

Harry concentrated on not hurting Belinda, who was content to sit there, stoic, saying nothing. Surprisingly it wasn't uncomfortable: something about the fact she knew everything and could do nothing was a relief.

'Listen, I'm sorry about yesterday. Outside the Common Room –'

'Looking shagged?'

He cast a glance around the class to make sure no-one had heard; Belinda laughed.

'Were you famous or something? You always think someone's listening in.'

He paused – she had a great, bushy beard which would rival the one Hagrid would grow and a very lopsided nose. *'You* listened in.'

Belinda winced. 'Fair point.'

Harry cleared his throat awkwardly but Belinda didn't say anything.

She merely watched him and he felt inclined to go on.

‘You’ve probably pieced it together. The future. Tom turns into the Dark Lord he wants to be, except worse. A lot worse.’

‘Why not kill him, then?’

His wand nearly poked into her eye. ‘I’m not a murderer. And anyway, it’s complicated.’

‘Because you’re shagging.’

‘No. God, I thought Slytherins were *subtle*.’

She shrugged. ‘I tried subtle. It didn’t exactly work. And anyway, you can’t keep judging us based on stereotypes. Does *Rosier* seem subtle to you? What about Abraxas?’

Harry’s lips twitched and he shook his head.

They fell into silence once more. After a while, Dumbledore announced it was time to switch around. Belinda had him take off his glasses and he felt incredibly vulnerable with her blurry face close by, wand inches from his throat. She realised this and leaned backwards. Harry kept his eyes open, watching her spell-work, her lips move over every syllable, but she didn’t complain. His face felt strange. Tingly, as though his skin was knitting together.

‘Do you think he’s using you?’ Belinda said, and Harry blinked at her.

‘Tom?’ He shrugged. ‘Yeah. He uses everyone. You know what he’s like. And anyway, I’m lying to him just as much –’

‘You’re far more genuine than Riddle,’ she said sharply. ‘Don’t let him convince you otherwise.’

Harry fidgeted in his seat, glancing away from her, staring at a pair of Hufflepuffs behind them.

‘Merlin, you’re practically squirming,’ Belinda said. ‘Is it because he’s a boy?’

Harry looked at her incredulously. His cheeks were already flooding with heat. 'Is *what* because he’s a boy?’

‘His manipulative ways. What do you *think*, Harry?’

He stared over her shoulder. Dumbledore was talking to Alastor Moody and his friend, Diggory, all of them laughing.

'I think you should give it a rest about Tom. It's *nothing.*'

'Okay. Whatever you say.' She leaned back to survey her spell-work.

Harry fidgeted again. 'I don't like boys,' he said.

A snort. 'Does Riddle know that?'

'I mean – yeah. Er –' he scowled at her.

'Things change. You can like both, you know.'

But everything in Harry's life that changed seemed to be for the worst. Why was he attracted to *Tom Riddle?* Him being a boy was the least of his problems at this rate.

Moments later, Belinda finished her spell-work and conjured a mirror. Harry put his glasses back on, amused to see he now had hundreds of freckles, blonde hair, and a much softer, round face. When he complained about that to Belinda, she pointed out the beard and they had a suitable laugh.

Dumbledore chose Moody and Diggory as his winners, who now looked like Dumbledore and Slughorn, complete with a flowing auburn beard and a thick gingery-blonde moustache.

'Delightful! I must say, I can't imagine my face has been that youthful for a while, Mr. Diggory. Is it a spell?'

Diggory adopted a mysterious expression that made Harry laugh. 'It's just the wonders of youth, sir.'

Dumbledore beamed. 'It is indeed. Very well, twenty points each! Now, if anyone wants me to help reverse their transfiguration before lunch, please form an orderly line.'

There was the screech of chairs as a dozen students stood. Harry and Belinda looked at each other and set to work on their appearances. Ten minutes later, Harry was rubbing his hands over his face, never so glad to have it back.

'Feel free to leave once you're suitably satisfied.' Dumbledore waved his hand and the door opened. 'And three feats of parchment on human to animal transfiguration, which we will begin next week. That

will be all.'

They trooped into the hall as the bell rang. Belinda glanced at him, biting her lip. 'You should trust yourself more,' was all she said, and they made their way to lunch.

When classes ended, Harry had enough homework to last all night. Quidditch practice was taking up a large portion of his time, and Alphard's determination wasn't wavering, even as the weather became colder and the evenings so dark they spent more time looking for the quaffle than hitting it.

Leaving the dorm, he shouldered his bag. The library, at least, would be quieter than the Common Room, where Avery and Rosier were arguing and first-years were playing exploding snap. He heard a voice as he descended the stairs. Another joining it. This one Harry recognised: Lucretia.

'It's just some harmless snogging!' she said heatedly and Harry paused on the stairs, unable to help himself. 'It doesn't mean anything. Merlin! We're attracted to each other. That's *it.*'

The other voice had to be Walburga. Harry couldn't make out her response – lower now, muffled. He stood there for a moment, listening as the remnants of conversation floated from the girls' dorm.

'Nobody has to know. So don't go writing home over *nothing.*'

Harry rubbed his scar, left the stairs, the Common Room, and made his way through the halls. The library was packed but silent.

It doesn't mean anything. We're attracted to each other. That's it.

Counter-charms . . . He needed a book on counter-charms . . .

He moved through the shelves, scanning the titles and hoping there were copies left. Usually he relied on Hermione beating the race of students, as she was always the first in the library. He found the right shelf and stared at it blankly for a moment.

'Shit.' Harry began to search, scan . . .

And Tom was sitting at the table between the shelves in Harry's line of vision. He was alone, his head lowered as he flicked through a book. Beside him, sat another pile, "creating a counter-charm" at the very top.

Harry waited several long moments and made his way over.

'Can I borrow that?' he said, aiming for nonchalant and failing spectacularly.

Tom's eyes rose from his page. 'Yes,' he said, after watching him for several seconds. He leaned back in his chair. 'Are we finished the whole avoidance thing, then?'

Harry lifted the Charms book and shrugged. 'Avoiding people is childish. Anyway, why would I be doing that?'

Tom's eyebrows rose and he glanced at the empty space beside him meaningfully. 'Childish is it, Harry? You *aren't* going to lock yourself back in the dorm?'

Harry sat down in the chair across from him. 'Happy now?' he said but Tom was beginning to smirk, was about to say something –

'I need to finish this essay.' Harry pulled the folded piece of parchment from his bag, dipped his quill in ink and continued the sentence he had left incomplete. For a moment, he managed to write, ignoring Tom's eyes – unashamed and watchful – and the satisfied expression he wore.

'Stop looking at me like that,' Harry said.

'I'm afraid it's just my face.'

'Then change it.'

He smiled, large and dramatic and fake. 'Happy now?'

'Looks painful.'

Tom dropped the smile. 'You know, Harry, as amusing as this is, I prefer avoidance to denial.'

Harry flicked a few pages through the charms textbook and found what he was looking for. 'Why should I care what you prefer? You're reading too much into it.'

'Am I? Or is your memory so poor that you forgot one delightful detail? *You* kissed *me*.'

If he expected Harry to splutter or blush it didn't happen. He had already spent the last day agonising it through his brain. 'And you clearly orchestrated it.'

‘Really?’ He didn’t sound very impressed, not even that Harry would give him so much credit.

‘Yes. Now, shut up. It didn’t mean anything.’ He looked at his essay again, saw nothing except Tom’s imprint, his casual position, the interest in his eyes.

Harry scratched out a sentence — *counter-charms are significantly weaker than initial spells* — and decided the whole essay could do with scrapping. He folded it in half and spent a moment rummaging in his bag for potions.

‘You feel so guilty about everything,’ Tom said. ‘It’s quite sickening.’

‘Well, you feel nothing and that’s worse.’

‘How? I know what I want. You spend all day brooding about Weasley and Granger and what they must think of you.’

Harry scowled at him. ‘You don’t know what I think.’

‘You’ve told them then?’

‘There’s nothing to *tell.*’

Tom hummed and Harry looked down at his books. Potions, shouldn’t he be doing that? He felt Tom glance at him a few more times – expectant, knowing – and ignored it. He scratched a few measly sentences as an introduction and Tom continued to flick lazily through his book.

It *didn’t* mean anything. Attraction, that was all. Harry didn’t like Tom more; didn’t trust him. It was nothing, really. He felt a need to remind Tom of this, too.

‘You’re a wanker,’ he said.

‘And?’

And, and, and –

‘Ah, screw it.’

Tom looked up. Harry looked down. He could feel Tom smiling – so patronisingly, so *insufferably* –

‘You’re making that face again,’ Harry said.

‘Oh? Do your potions' homework then. You don’t want to be kicked out of the Slug Club.’

‘Don’t tempt me.’

‘That isn’t how I tempt people, dear.’ He said it in such a way, low and full of conviction, that Harry paused his writing.

‘You’re full of shit. Do you even listen to half the things you say?’

‘Yes, actually. I *do* like the sound of my own voice.’

Harry snorted and Tom grinned.

‘I really have to do this,’ Harry said finally, gesturing at the mess of homework in front of him.

Tom pulled a face. ‘You don’t want to go back to the dorm and snog a bit?’

Harry’s quill slipped and he gaped at him. Tom’s expression barely flickered, still so casual, so serious. Harry’s heart rate quickened.

‘NEWTs are coming up,’ he said finally.

Tom scoffed. ‘Yeah, in *June.’*

Harry bit his lip and for one long moment, he almost agreed. Then he shook his head. Cleared it, even though his thoughts were muddled and nothing was definite, more *oh, what the hell.*

‘Piss off, Tom,’ he said.

Tom grinned, wide and unkind and far too triumphant.

Harry looked back at his essay. He didn’t know what he was feeling. It was an odd mixture of guilt and relief tangled together, pushed somewhere far down. Something he didn’t want to address. Couldn’t.

It wasn’t good. It wasn’t healthy.

Harry ignored it.

Release

Harry didn't know what he had expected but his relationship with Tom didn't change drastically. It was just as well too, because he would easily call it quits the moment things became too real. Harry told himself, to make it seem okay, that if - when - they went back to their own time, it would be a distant memory. A dirty, horrible secret for only him. Everything would be different then. There would be no Belinda, no Abraxas, no Tom…

Dumbledore would be dead, and Harry would be back in Bellatrix's vault, searching through mounds of gold.

He told himself that being close to Tom was a good thing. That he could find out something vital for defeating Voldemort.

He ignored the part that simply *wanted* it. The part that craved his companionship, relished being the one Tom gave his undivided attention to. That even liked their disagreements. But he knew he could give it up if necessary. And that, more than anything, was what kept Harry comforted.

'You're so *good*, it makes me sick.'

They were in the winding corridor leading to the Common Room. Harry, cold and windswept from outdoors, and Tom, cheeks pink, beginning to smirk.

'Because I don't think you should have a trophy for murdering a student?'

'It's for finding the heir of Slytherin.'

'With what? A mirror?'

Hagrid's hut was visible on the long walk back from Herbology, and seeing it, Harry had started a discussion: they had been arguing all the way from the entrance hall.

'It's not *my* fault he was keeping a pet Acromantula. Doesn't that warrant an expulsion?'

'Not for murdering a student.'

Tom waved his hand. 'Small details.'

The corridor was empty. Harry's blood felt hot. Tom's face was inches from his and he was smiling in that insufferable way.

'I am going to talk to Dumbledore about it.'

'Try it and see. Dumbledore can do *nothing*.'

They had stopped. Harry could see the slight ring of red in Tom's eyes, the way his pupils dilated. 'I really hate you,' he said.

'Me too.'

Tom was watching him, and a hand went to his tie, playing there, lazily.

'Don't you need to go and see your stupid Death Eaters?' Harry said.

So close it was enough to make him dizzy. Tom's breath was warm against his own, and his mouth parted –

'They can wait.'

His lips were pressing against Harry's. Harry's fingers gripped robes, hair, hard enough to feel real. Searing and hot and *mean* and everything momentarily forgotten. It hadn't changed drastically. It wasn't a big deal. Attraction.

Nothing.

Tom was a horrible person but that was what made it alright. That was what Harry told himself throughout the day. That was what went through his head when he avoided Ron and Hermione, when he felt Dumbledore glance at him from the Head Table, or his friends from across the hall. And with that thought in mind, it was easy to trick himself as well. Shut it all out, wasn't that what everyone used to say? *Clear your mind, Harry*.

Well, Harry was getting good at clearing his mind. He imagined Snape and what he would think if he could see him now. The thought brought unexpected laughter as he imagined the all-too-familiar sneer.

'What's so amusing?' Tom said.

Harry glanced back down at the potion they were meant to make, and the lacewing flies he was cutting. Purple fumes wafted through the dungeon, making it hard to see.

'Nothing,' Harry said, 'the flies are done.'

Tom gave them a dirty look. The rare times that Slughorn made them share a cauldron always ended in arguing. Tom hated working with someone, especially Harry, whose mediocre potion-skills left things slightly off.

Today was no different.

‘Get over it! It’s only class. We’re not in some brewing competition, it’s fine.’

‘Fine? Do those glasses work at all? A blind person could tell it’s clearly ruined.’

‘Then fix it, potions genius. Aren’t you meant to be –’

‘Boys,’ Slughorn interrupted. ‘Not fighting here, I hope?’

‘No, sir,’ they said, and Harry gritted his teeth.

'Well, a healthy discussion always has some disagreement. And something's going well.’ He looked into the cauldron approvingly.

Tom’s face darkened. Slughorn didn’t notice.

'Anyway, the Slug Club are having a little meeting on Friday. You'll both be there, I hope?'

'Of course, professor,' Tom said.

'I have Quidditch practice.’

Slughorn's face fell. 'Well, I say Slytherin will definitely have the cup this year for sure! God knows Alphard will see to it with all that practice . . .'

'I'm sure he would take the evening off,' Tom said, still looking at Slughorn. 'He wouldn't miss the Slug Club.'

'Indeed, indeed. Very well, boys, I'll see you both there.'

When he was out of earshot, Harry gave Tom a disgusted look. ‘He doesn’t think our potion's a heap of shit. What was it he said – something’s going right?’

‘That’s only because he likes me. It’s an *embarrassment.*’

‘It’s decent. And what do you mean Alphard wouldn’t miss the Slug Club? Anyone with half a brain would.'

‘Actually, Harry, most people like the opportunities it presents. Only you think you’re above it.’

‘I don’t think I’m above it. It’s just *shit.* I'd rather have detention than sit with the Tom Riddle fan club in that stupid office.'

'The Tom Riddle fan club? They're called the *Death-Eaters*.'

Harry scoffed. 'Same thing.'

To Harry's great surprise, the next week in Charms they began Patronuses. Professor Flitwick was droning on about 'a finicky, complicated spell that would not be suited to everyone.'

Harry had zoned out. He was thinking about Ron and Hermione, who were giving him the cold shoulder. Harry couldn't blame them, and head still ringing with past insults, he sat beside Abraxas.

'Does this mean we’re friends again?' Abraxas said, sounding quite excited. 'Because I already talked to Belinda, and well – she said no-one likes nosy, interfering gits.'

Harry snickered. He didn't think Abraxas would like knowing he sat there by accident and instead shrugged. 'Alright. As long as you're not a nosy interfering git we shouldn't have a problem.'

‘Great! You know how bad the other Slytherin boys are. Well, Alphard’s alright. And there’s Tom but he’s not exactly a *friend*, is he? I’m not going to start talking about Quidditch with him.’

‘Only serious Death-Eater matters,’ Harry said, rolling his eyes.

He turned back to Professor Flitwick.

'The Patronus Charm is not simply suited to happy people. What it is suited to is hope. You need a memory so strong—a memory so powerful—you can hold it long enough to conjure a corporeal guardian. The Patronus requires a mindset, which many people will not be able to enter, especially under great stress. However, we will be working on this over the next few weeks.'

A little while later, they started practising. Harry glanced over at Ron and Hermione, found them with their heads together, whispering. Some of the Slytherins gave up on the spell after ten minutes, Tom included.

Professor Flitwick walked around the class, watching how they fared. Finding out they could cast it, he made Harry, Ron and Hermione demonstrate. Harry ignored the wary looks the Slytherins gave him.

Abraxas had managed a misty, white light by the end of class and was very excited. 'Did you see? I was thinking about Quidditch, of course, and I *know* I saw something. It was – it was a unicorn, wasn't it?'

‘Weirdest looking unicorn I’ve ever seen,’ Harry said, unable to suppress laughter. ‘Good job, though. Most people got nothing.’

'I know! Why do you know the spell anyway? Or was it because –’he winced. 'Never mind.'

Harry knew he was thinking about his supposed 'past' which involved dead parents, Weasleys, and Gellert Grindelwald.

'Yes, Harry,' Tom said, coming up beside them, 'that was interesting.'

'You think everything's interesting. But you're right. I use it to ward off dark magic. You know, dementors, lethifolds, *Death-Eaters.'*

'Funny,' Tom said, 'and here I thought you were embracing Slytherin.'

'The only thing I’ll embrace is –’ he caught sight of Ron and Hermione and the words died.

'Ginny Weasley?'

Harry met Ron's eye before a couple of students walked past, blocking his view.

'What are you two on about?' Abraxas said, sounding bewildered.

'Nothing,' Harry said, as he saw Tom open his mouth. 'Do you ever

give it a rest about her?'

'She was your old girlfriend, wasn't she?' Abraxas said, suddenly nodding his head. 'The one you had to leave.'

'We broke up.'

'And what was the reason again?' Tom said.

'What are you – *jealous?'*

He didn't want to think about Ginny. Ginny was gone.

'Curious,' Tom said.

Abraxas looked between them. 'What . . . ‘he shook his head. 'You know what, never mind.'

'You don't know what you're on about,' Harry said, 'and don't mention her. Or Ron or Hermione.'

'Why? Does it make you feel bad?'

'Don't.'

'It's a secret, isn't it? A shameful little –’

'Let's go and play quidditch, Abraxas,' Harry said loudly.

Tom laughed. 'You're so easy to irritate.'

'It's your personality, it brings it out in me.'

'Quidditch,' Abraxas said, eyes darting about. 'Yeah, let's do that.'

Harry paused a moment. Tom waited.

'It's not a game you know,' he said. 'They really are off-limits.'

Tom smiled. The corridor around them began to empty. 'See you later, Harry,' he said.

Harry bit back an answer. With Abraxas following behind, he went into the air, not thinking of Ginny, Tom, or the sharp stab of guilt they evoked.

Harry snogged Tom when no-one was around and spent the days practising quidditch and doing homework, which was starting to become overwhelming. He barely saw Ron and Hermione anymore, and when he did, he felt so bad he immediately had to make up some sort of excuse. Dumbledore's eyes often sought him from the Head Table, but Harry avoided that as well.

It was with Tom that Harry spent most of his time. And if it wasn't Tom, it was Belinda and Abraxas, neither Ron and Hermione would approve of. His whole world was so full of Slytherins that it seemed to be green.

The time-turner was buried at the very bottom of his trunk, and he kept his invisibility cloak on him at all times, only putting it down for quidditch. Sometimes, it felt like a reminder. Sometimes, when he was well and truly alone, he would tell himself things like, *you'll steal his horcruxes,* or, *it's better to give in to Tom instead of having him as an enemy*.

On Halloween morning, he woke early and made his way down to the Common Room, where several dozen live bats fluttered.

'Hello,' Abraxas said. He was the only person there, seated at a table beside one of the round windows.

'Hey,' Harry said, coming over and gazing at the bats. 'What are you doing?'

'Drawing. I think the snake's a bit funny looking though.'

Harry glanced down and his stomach dropped.

Abraxas had drawn a skull with a snake protruding from the mouth. It was in charcoal and the whole thing was slightly smudged. Hazy, as though it gleamed through the clouds, hung in the sky, behind a fine mist –

'You designed this?'

'Yes, what do you think?'

'Tom told you to do this?' Harry said, still staring at it.

'Well, no,' Abraxas said, starting to sound uncertain. 'It's for the

Death-Eaters. We were looking for a symbol –'

Harry didn't catch the rest of the words. 'I just can't change it, can I?' he murmured.

'What?'

'Nothing.' He stared down at it, and the urge to rip the drawing into a hundred pieces came over him.

'What's wrong with you? Do you not like it? I *knew* it looked stupid.'

'I'm sure he'll love it,' Harry said quietly. 'It doesn't matter what I think.'

Doesn't matter what Harry thought. Doesn't matter what Harry *did.*

'I care what you think –' Abraxas began.

Harry moved, the image of the Dark Mark still in his head. 'You really care what I think? Then I think you should stay far away from Tom Riddle while you still have the chance.'

Hypocrite.

He could almost hear the thought going around Abraxas' head. Hear the questions spinning. Or maybe those questions were aloud, but Harry walked away, and they sounded like white noise.

It didn't matter what he did. Harry's future wasn't hopeful like Abraxas'. It was war and violence and death.

It was Tom and it was Voldemort and it always had been. But it didn't matter about *Harry.*

With the Dark Mark still fresh before his eyes, he left the Common Room.

It seemed overnight the atmosphere had changed in Slytherin. There was a chill in the air and it wasn't caused by the poor weather. The Common Room was full of whispers, quiet enough that Harry never heard what they were saying. He caught snatches: '. . . *Grindelwald*

defeated . . . and look what happened the Lestranges . . . doesn't exactly seem good for purebloods now, does it . . . '

Belinda's father, who owned a potions store in Knockturn Alley, was being questioned. The store shut down, the house was searched and a small announcement in the prophet read: *Lestrange family under investigation for aiding Dark Wizard Grindelwald in his terrible onslaught on Europe.*

'They'll find a way out of it,' Belinda said. 'They always do. Or they'll vanish and take my sister with them.'

When Harry asked what was going to happen to her, she shrugged. 'They say it's my fault for drawing attention to the family after Hogsmeade. I'm to marry Arnoldo in the spring if I ever want to see my sister again.'

'It's hardly your fault Grindelwald went and got locked up in Azkaban,' Abraxas said, 'you didn't force them to keep the house full of dark magic.'

Belinda said nothing and Harry supposed that, like him, she was thinking of how she had been the cause of Grindelwald's defeat and more involved than Abraxas knew.

Harry didn't care for the whispers in the Common Room. He had never been involved in house matters and wasn't planning to be now. Tom, however, did.

'Don't you see?' he said. 'They're having second thoughts. They're having – thoughts.'

That made Harry laugh and Tom glared.

'Sorry,' he said, 'but I still don't see why it matters. You're not going to be Voldemort for years. And then things will change. So, a few opinions now – does it really matter?'

The thought of Voldemort quickly erased Harry's good humour.

Tom didn't notice. 'They see that because Belinda's family were close to Grindelwald they're being questioned. They have the potential to lose everything.'

Harry chewed his lip and watched him. 'If they're loyal,' he said, 'if they're truly loyal, they won't care.'

Tom looked at him for a long moment, with a slight frown on his face.

'Loyalty doesn't mean mind-control,' Harry said, 'or keeping them quiet and giving them no thoughts of their own. They should – 'he paused. 'They should like you, want to serve you so much, the consequences don't matter.'

Tom continued to stare at him and Harry felt strangely exposed. 'That's what true loyalty is.'

He waited a moment, saw Tom mull it around in his head, his brow furrowed.

'Any loyalty,' Tom said, 'can be broken by fear. The right threat or promise. Everything we do, it comes back to ourselves. They serve Lord Voldemort in the hope of the future they will have. Whether that be a world run by purebloods, power beyond their dreams, or a healthy spot of muggle killing.'

Harry didn't smile.

'A job, a dream, a *reward.* That's what they're fuelled by. Protection and safety. It has to be worth it.'

Harry paused for a moment, leaning back in his chair to watch him. 'So all of them, you think they would leave for a more desirable option?'

'You don't? It's human nature, Harry.'

But it wasn't. At least not to him.

'You don't trust anyone. What about Rosier then? What does he want?'

'Rosier's bloodthirsty,' Tom said, 'he wants to be able to kill muggles without consequences.'

None of them – he truly trusted none of them.

'You're wrong about human nature,' Harry said.

Tom raised his eyebrows and leaned forward. 'Enlighten me then.'

'You don't believe in true loyalty. You think everyone can be turned, one way or another. You wouldn't ever trust them, even if they proved

themselves. You'd keep them at a distance. But that's not true. People can be truly loyal, and not just for their own gain.'

He stopped abruptly and looked at Tom's face. 'You could have followers that would take a killing curse for you, and not because they fear the consequences. Who wouldn't ever betray your trust.'

Tom didn't say anything for a very long moment. Harry felt like he was holding his breath but he wasn't sure why.

'That's ridiculous,' Tom finally said. 'And naive.'

'It's what it's like to have a friend.'

'I don't have friends,' Tom said, 'I have no use for them.'

'Well, maybe if you had some, you would find a use.'

'I don't want them,' he said, 'and your grand declarations about love are ridiculous. You sound like Dumbledore.'

'I do not,' Harry said. 'You could have people that loyal, Tom. It exists.'

'Well, I do not care for it. Love and friendship are ideas of the foolish. Of the *common*. And I am above them.' His fingers were moving across the tabletop, restlessly.

Harry felt like he had said enough. Felt like they were only a few sentences away from an explosion. 'I hope you manage to be satisfied then,' he said finally. 'When your plans come through.'

Tom glanced up from the tabletop. 'I will,' he said.

Harry looked out the window. It was raining again, waterdrops sliding slowly down the pane. He watched one make its way down and disappear as it reached the bottom. And he wanted . . . He didn't know what he wanted.

Harry looked back at Tom. His fingers were still twitching.

They didn't talk about it again, and when Tom met him that evening,

he flopped into his seat by the fire and said, 'they understand.'

'Understand what?' Harry said.

'They understand the consequences that serving Grindelwald had. But they also understand another thing. Unlike Grindelwald, Lord Voldemort will succeed.'

'That's a bold statement,' Harry said, 'no-one rules forever.'

'That's what you believe,' Tom said, 'but with the right power –'

'You can bully everyone into submission. *Right.* There will always be resistance.'

'People like you then?' Tom said, 'like Dumbledore? You don't think when I control the wizarding world, I will be able to handle a few rebels?'

'I'm sure you'll give it your best shot,' Harry said. 'Anyway, let's not talk about your ambitions. All that arrogance makes my head hurt.'

'And your hopeful morals turn my stomach,' Tom said, 'it almost makes me want to change my ways and live a nice, boring life.'

'I never said boring,' Harry said.

Tom scoffed. 'It's inevitable. The curse of the common.'

Harry stared into the green flames and wondered what it was like to be consumed by the desire to rule like Tom was. The desire to be the best. The only one. The unquenchable desire that couldn't be satisfied.

'I need to do rounds,' Tom said, standing up. 'You know, check broom closets, scare a few fifth-years and make sure everyone behaves.'

He smirked. Harry rolled his eyes.

'Do you want to come?'

'That doesn't sound very . . . allowed.'

'I'm Head Boy.' He shrugged in that unbothered way of his. 'It hardly matters.'

They walked through the darkened halls. The first floor was empty, apart from portraits, snoozing in their frames, and Peeves, who disappeared at the sight of them. On the second floor, there were two Ravenclaws out of bed: Tom deducted points while adopting an air of false sympathy. Harry was beginning to believe he was a sadist. They also ran into Lucretia. She was in an empty classroom, along with a tall, freckled boy who for one astonished moment Harry believed to be Ron. It was Ignatius Prewett: pureblood, Gryffindor and a blood-traitor.

‘Wasn’t that delightful?’ Tom said. He hadn’t deducted any points from Slytherin, but ten from Gryffindor. ‘Lucretia thinks I don’t know of her nightly exploits. Oh *dear.*’

‘You’re cruel,’ Harry said, ‘and anyway, he’s a pureblood. Why does it matter?’

‘She’s a *Black*. In their eyes, that means royalty.’

They got back to the Common Room half an hour later. The snake statues over the mantelpiece shone their eerie eyes in the dark, and the green fires had died out. Harry wasn't tired. He felt wide awake, as though he had been running or playing Quidditch.

'Are you going to say anything to Lucretia?' he asked, as they climbed the stairs to the boys' dorm and went inside.

Rosier was snoring loudly and Tom cast a disgusted look in the direction of his four-poster.

'She'll come and find me,' Tom said, 'tomorrow. The fear will eat away at her.' He waved his wand and Rosier's snores disappeared.

'You love making people give in,' Harry said, 'they always have to bow, don’t they? You love making it difficult.’

‘It’s fun,’ he said, ‘the fear. The temptation. The *struggle.*’ And then, while still locking eyes with Harry, he began to unbutton the top of his robes.

‘What are you doing?’ Harry said.

'Going to bed.’ Shoes kicked off. Fingers working at a tie. ‘What does it look like?’

Harry's mouth felt dry. 'Er –' he began, and swallowed as more and more pale skin was exposed. 'Right.'

'Why, Harry? You don't *want* anything, do you?'

Harry tore his eyes away from his hands, making neat work of his robes, and up to his face, and the smirk at his mouth.

'No,' he said, 'I'm going to bed.'

'Goodnight then,' Tom said easily.

It's fun. The temptation. The struggle.

But as Harry made his way to his own four-poster, looking at the cold sheets with no traces of tiredness, he almost gave in. He was hard and Tom was right there. Tom *was right there* and it blocked out every rational thought. Who cared if it was all some elaborate mind game as long as he got off?

Frustrated, he stared at the ceiling. It was so *stupid.*

'You sure you're okay over there, Harry?'

'Perfect,' he said, partially muffled by the curtains. 'Now piss off, Tom.'

Sleep seemed impossible but eventually he drifted off. He dreamed he was back in the Chamber of Secrets and Tom was standing in that puddle of water. 'Don't you want it, Harry?' he said, his voice echoing. And then Salazar Slytherin's mouth started to open up – the stone began to creak – and the basilisk slithered out. 'You asked for this, didn't you?'

Harry tried to answer but to his horror, he found himself nodding. His feet were rooted in place. He couldn't move. The basilisk was coming closer. He watched as its huge body swept over the floor . . .

And he wasn't in the Chamber anymore but in a drawing-room, with bodies lying around him. He had been lied to – all his life. They didn't want him. His father, his pathetic muggle father was dead on the ground. He stared down at those glassy brown eyes, and tidy cropped hair, hatred boiling in every part of his body –

And his scar burned, he lifted his hands to it –

Harry woke, biting his lip against the pain and stifling a gasp. He

drew his hand away slowly, but another wave of pain shot through it and he clamped it back.

Tom. Tom was dreaming.

He waited a moment for the pain to subside. It didn't. Whatever Tom was dreaming, he was *angry*.

Harry squinted into the dark, knowing he hadn't slept very long, but unable to care. Still clutching his scar, he climbed out of bed and over to the one beside him.

He pulled open Tom's curtains and stared down at him: lying on his side, brows knitted. 'Tom? Tom? *Wake the fuck up.'*

Tom jumped upwards and grabbed his wand. 'What the hell –' he stopped abruptly, and all traces of sleep disappeared from his face. 'Oh. You saw – *oh.'*

Harry gingerly let go of his scar. The pain had already started to fade. 'Yeah.'

They looked at each other, breathing heavily.

'Who were those dead people? Relatives?'

'That is none of your business. You think because you saw, you have any right to ask? It's meant to have *stopped*.'

'I guess it hasn't.'

'How dare you,' Tom said, voice low, jaw clenched, 'come here, just because your *scar's hurting*? And have the nerve to ask, as though it has anything to do with you?'

'Right,' Harry snapped, 'this never happened then. Is that what you want to hear?'

'I want this to stop.' And then, quick as anything, he grabbed Harry's wrist, pulling him forward. 'Why the hell do you get to *see* –'

Harry almost fell into the bed. He scrambled into a sitting position, Tom's fingers still tight on his wrist, eyes dark and angry.

'It's stupid,' Harry said. 'We need to make it stop.'

'It's a *joke,'* Tom said, right up in his space. 'And your scar –' he

released the wrist. Traced Harry's scar with his finger, sending a jolt of heat straight through him. 'What *is* it?'

'I don't know! You think I like waking up because you're angry? Having your stupid dreams about killing people, you *pyscho*?'

'I think you don't realise how stupid you are. You're lucky my patience hasn't worn thin.'

'You're so full of shit,' Harry said. 'Your patience has run out a dozen times. What are you going to do about it? Try and kill me again?'

'Do you *really* think you should test me right now?'

'I don't know, Tom, after all, you dragged me here – quite literally –'

Tom shoved him against the mattress, and Harry's words were cut off as he felt the press of his body over his own, as Tom's lips found his neck. And *oh*– he was hard. Harry groaned a bit at the contact; the feel of his cock pressed against his own. The frustration he had gone to sleep with was back. Had maybe always been there.

'Dragged you? Feel free to leave then. Maybe have some nice, pleasant dreams –' Tom bit down on a spot near his jaw. Lapped over it with his tongue.

'You killed them, didn't you?' Harry said. 'Your own family?'

Tom stilled. Harry took the moment to grab one of his shoulders, shove him off and lean over.

'Rubbish. Do you want me to pry into *your* dreams, Harry? That godfather of yours – you have a lot of guilt there.'

'But I'm not a *murderer,*' he snarled and crushed their mouths together. Tom grabbed a fistful of his t-shirt, pulled him closer. And now there was that friction – that rough, not-nearly-enough press of his dick –

Harry ground down against him, the noise he made muffled by Tom's mouth. It was dark and the middle of the night and there was only heat, and building pleasure, and the sting of lips against his own.

Tom's fingers found his cock, straining through the material of his underwear. 'Fuck,' Harry breathed. Tom's hand was on his dick, and his mind was swimming, and nothing mattered –

'I *am* a murderer,' Tom said, his voice rough. He was still stroking him

through the fabric, ever so lightly. ‘Does that make you feel *bad?*’

‘No, but you’d love that, wouldn’t you? God, do you ever *shut up*?’

He felt it was only fair and found Tom’s cock too, who inhaled raggedly. Harry took a savage sort of pleasure in making him twitch. He moved from where he leaned over Tom, so instead was lying flat, and carelessly shoved his underwear aside.

Tom shifted and did the same. His breathing was sharp from beside Harry. And when his hand wrapped around Harry’s shaft, Harry had to bite down on his lips to keep quiet.

He found Tom’s cock and roughly stroked him, matching the frantic pace, the slight sting of pain. He was unable to think, to care, to feel anything except Tom’s fist, and his thumb twisting over the head of his dick, and – *god.*

The feeling was becoming too much. A pressure was building in his stomach, almost painful in its intensity. Harry tightened his grip on Tom’s cock, losing the rhythm. His eyes were tightly shut. Tom made a noise like a groan beside him. Harry could see him in the half-light, felt that spike of pleasure –

He shuddered and came after several hard strokes.

He felt the moment Tom spilled into his hand, heard the slight hitch in his breathing and, for a moment, wished it wasn't so dark. Then Tom stilled, his stomach muscles jumping under Harry’s hand.

Fingers still sticky with cum, Harry shifted, staring up at the stretch of ceiling. They were both breathing heavily. He couldn’t care about his spent cock or the mess between them. For a while, they lay there, silent.

As the after-effects of his orgasm died away, Harry shuffled around. He felt warm – much too warm –

He moved away from the press of Tom’s body and raked a hand through his hair, pushing away damp strands. Fumbling with his wand, he vanished the cum between them and risked looking up.

Tom was naked, and unabashed, skin gleaming in the half-light. He was stretched out, watching him. Harry had expected smugness. Gloats. But Tom said nothing.

Harry didn't either. He shoved the duvet aside and lay down for another moment. There was just enough space for them not to touch.

It would be easy to close his eyes. Fall into the sheets, the warmth, and allow sleep to take him.

He sat up and gathered his things. 'Night then,' he said, unable to suppress a yawn.

There was a pause. It lingered for a second.

'Goodnight, Harry,' Tom said.

The mattress dipped as he got up.

His own bed was cold. *Comfortable,* he thought. And listening to Abraxas snore lightly and his dorm-mates shuffle around, Harry slept.

Keep Your Enemies Closer

Tom knew Harry was hiding something. He also knew he was no closer to finding out what it was. It was locked in his head, in a neat little box, that even he feared to access. Tom didn't dare read his mind. It was a chance he couldn't take, not when Harry's resolve had cracked and he was beginning to relax. Tom saw it, sometimes, how easy it would be to go back to the way things were.

The conflict in Harry's eyes, the sheer struggle he had with himself. Tom smiled. Yes. Harry was too much of a prize to let slip away that easily.

He remained interesting. He remained intriguing. He remained *Tom's*.

Harry wasn't in the Common Room but that was no matter. Tom would see him soon enough. He had other plans today. Important ones.

The Slytherin Quidditch Team trained at eleven on a Saturday morning and Tom watched them from the library window, pinpricks of green against a dull grey sky. He followed the one that was Harry, higher than the rest, on Orion's spare broomstick.

For several moments he waited. The library doors swung open and a whisper started up. Tom sat perfectly still.

'I don't know! Honestly, I've tried talking to him, you know what he's like once he's made up his mind . . . '

The voice got louder, and another chimed in. Tom listened as the owners made their way through the shelves, and closer to where he sat.

'He's a bloody Slytherin now. I just wish –' The male voice hesitated. 'I wish he'd talk to us for once, not them.'

Tom stood, lifted the book on his table, and went over to the shelves Hermione Granger and Ron Weasley resided at.

They stopped talking at once. It was comical how they inched together, how Weasley's mouth fell open and Granger's eyes widened to the size of galleons.

Tom carefully put the book in its correct place, spent a few seconds

reading the spines, and turned to them. 'Oh,' he said and blinked. 'You're Harry's friends, aren't you?'

Weasley stiffened. Granger looked like she wanted to flee.

'What do you want, Riddle?' Weasley said, his voice low. Granger nudged him, in a way that was meant to be inconspicuous. But she didn't say anything, only stared at him with that suspicious, startled expression.

'Nothing,' Tom said. 'To talk, I suppose.'

They shared a look. He saw where Harry got it from now, the expressive faces, the obvious dislike.

Granger recovered quicker than Weasley. 'What do you want to talk about?' she said. Her books she clutched to her chest, as though Tom was going to snatch them away at any moment.

'Well, you two are his best friends, aren't you?'

'What's it to you?' Weasley said, ‘where's Harry now?'

'Quidditch Practice.' Tom smiled. 'You didn't know?'

He knew it would be close to impossible to make them like him. Something about that made the whole thing more enjoyable.

'Of course we knew,' Weasley responded, while Granger continued to watch him with her worried face.

'I just thought,' Tom said, 'that since you two are his best friends, we should talk. Clear the air.'

'What do you mean, *clear the air*?' Granger said.

'All this . . . animosity. I see no reason we shouldn't be friends. After all, we all like *Harry* here, don't we?'

'Yes,' Weasley said, looking like it pained him very much. 'But I think you should leave Harry alone.'

'Why?' He kept his voice light, his expression just slightly surprised.

'You might be a bad influence,' Granger said, 'and Harry doesn't need distractions.'

'I might be a good influence,' Tom disagreed, 'and maybe make him actually study.'

He saw Granger, in Ancient Runes and Arithmancy, fighting for the attention the professors lavished on him. The way her hand would rise but she would never get the same fond looks.

'I think you should leave him alone,' she said again.

He met her eyes and cocked his head.

'Why do you dislike me?' Tom said. He kept his fingers on his wand in his pocket and thought that long-practiced incantation.

Granger faltered and Tom swam through her head – quite literally swam. There was knowledge everywhere. Ideas teeming on the surface, cluttering every section. She thought a dozen things at once. He was hit in the face by one emotion; another whirling past.

Why do you dislike me?

The question seemed to strum in her head, repeat over and over. He followed it, diving through the tangle of thoughts, following that single strand, batting aside the rest.

Voldemort. You-Know-Who.

He saw the shape in Harry's dreams, a dark-cloaked figure, blurry and unfocused.

He saw the three of them, with a sword. Horcrux. Horcrux.

Harry — a younger Harry — covered in blood and sweat, clutching a body, with a cup lying beside him.

Monster.

He blinked and it disappeared.

'You're a Slytherin,' Granger said, not noticing how he had just brushed through her mind. 'And you're a dark wizard.'

'I assure you that isn't true.'

'Yes, it is,' Weasley said. 'What are you doing with Harry anyway? Can't you leave him alone?'

Tom met his eyes. 'Why should I leave him alone?'

Legilimens.

His mind was more difficult to wade through but he managed nevertheless. He felt it, on the surface. *Harry.* And Weasley – bless him – was ever so defensive. Tpm slowly grabbed it, that hatred, that indignation, diving through a blur of shapes and colours and emotions so strong they stung.

A rebound curse. The Chosen One. You-Know-Who.

Tom pulled out.

'Because we know you're lying! You - you're a –'

'I'm a *what,* Weasley?'

Weasley flinched at his tone, but Tom wasn't interested in them any longer. He had what he wanted. He had the truth.

And yet –

'Does Harry tell you *anything* he gets up to? It seems like I know your dear friend better than you do.'

'And how do you know Harry? Through stabbing him in the back a hundred times?'

'Intimately.'

It was priceless, really. Their faces, their disgust.

'You're fucking lying,' Weasley said, taking a step backwards and knocking into the shelf. 'You're so twisted –'

'I don't know, Ron, I'd say Harry's pretty twisted himself. What am I again – a murderer?'

Granger's eyes darted. 'Stay away from him,' she said sharply. 'He's not a game.'

Liars, all of them. What would it be like to lose it all? Those secrets they clung to? Their only hope?

'What a pity,' Tom said, watching the guarded faces, the palpable hatred. The *lies,* kept so close. 'Our precious Chosen One doesn't have

a mind for himself. Can you honestly say you're surprised?'

Granger blanched, face slackening. Tom saw the widening of Weasley's eyes and relished it, the way his entire body froze, stiff and disbelieving. He saw the moment they lost it all.

But it was only a moment. Granger was reaching into her pocket and Tom was ready.

'Obliviate,' he said, and then again to Weasley.

A bit of the light dimmed in their eyes. They would remember this, meeting him. The mutual dislike, the watchfulness. Talking to Tom and nothing more. Not the last moment.

The moment he *knew*. Knew he was – that they were –

'Goodbye then.'

He stepped past them, towards the library doors.

Time-travellers. From the future. From a place where Voldemort ruled.

They knew about his horcruxes.

Tom's eyes widened.

He went to his trunk to check the diary. Quickly, he sifted through the clothes, pulling out books, tossing them on the floor, and found it at the bottom. Inspecting it from all angles, Tom knew it hadn't been tampered with. He would feel it, wouldn't he? If someone destroyed a piece of his soul?

Harry knew of his horcruxes.

That shape came to him, the blurry one in Granger's mind, like a boggart with no true form. Lord Voldemort.

Harry had defeated him as a baby but he was back. Somehow, somehow . . .

It didn't make any sense.

It explained the hatred. It explained the fear. It explained why Granger and Weasley were so afraid of him, why Harry was so suspicious.

Because he's from the future, when you're the most powerful wizard in the world.

And now that he knew, he was never going to be defeated. Not by a baby, not through his horcruxes. He put the diary back in his trunk — cast a dozen spells around it — and set off.

Harry had a fabled invisibility cloak but was dirt poor. Harry never got lost in the castle and avoided the trick steps as though it was second-nature. Harry *knew* the school – he had that deep-rooted prejudice, that suspicion towards the Slytherins – that only growing up in Hogwarts brought.

Harry Potter was a liar and he was meant to be Tom's downfall.

'My lord? Are you alright?' Rosier's voice was hesitant, ever so slightly eager, and Tom ignored it.

Why would he attack a baby? How did they know about the horcruxes?

Dumbledore.

Sharp panic flared inside his chest.

Dumbledore must know. All those meetings with Harry; their closeness. The way he looked at Tom like all his suspicions were confirmed.

Because they *were*. He knew what Tom was capable of. Harry had told him. And now, now –

'My lord?'

'What do you want, Edwin?' Tom said.

He pieced together what he saw from Granger and Weasley. In the future, Voldemort tried to kill Harry as a baby. The three of them discovered the horcruxes and made it their mission to destroy Voldemort. *Harry's* mission.

But know that Tom knew, it wasn't going to happen again. Harry Potter wasn't going to kill him. He wasn't ever going back.

The Gaunt Ring was a reassuring weight on his finger and Tom remained calm. He couldn't kill Harry. He had to find out more.

And wasn't it just the perfect secret? Wasn't it so much bigger than he had suspected? Wasn't it glorious?

He couldn't kill Harry because there were so many things that didn't make sense.

Harry hadn't taken the horcruxes.

Yet.

No matter what happened, Tom wasn't going to die. Not with his ring, not with his diary, not now and not ever. His dreams were just out of sight – they were bright and wonderful and *possible* – and now he had seen his end, it would never come about.

The thought of killing Harry was satisfying. But the idea of twisting him, of changing him, of ruining everything he was and had been raised to be, was better.

Tom was good at changing people. And Harry? Harry would come willingly.

Tom searched the trunk but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Clothes, parchment, ink bottles, and second-hand textbooks. He became distracted when he found the Invisibility Cloak half-way down. He took it out, ran the smooth material through his hands, and

slipped it over his head.

Flawless. There wasn't a shimmer, a flicker, or a faint outline. He was completely invisible.

But aside from this property, the cloak seemed ordinary.

A Deathly Hallow.

A fairytale was his immediate thought. The worst of the three Hallows, the useless one.

Tom wanted the wand. The Death Stick. He wanted it so much it was painful, wanted to kill Albus Dumbledore and prise it from his cold, dead hands.

Patience.

He wasn't strong enough yet.

He put the invisibility cloak back and exited the dorm, head swimming with plans for the future. Harry's trunk was unremarkable, everything about him seemingly ordinary.

Lies.

He found Harry in the Common Room with Abraxas. They were hunched over textbooks and both looked up.

'Tom,' Harry said, and his mouth flickered like he was going to smile. 'You don't happen to know why Cassius Burke was obsessed with turning into a bear, do you?'

Tom looked at him for a moment and forced everything far down. 'Yes actually, he wanted one as a childhood pet. But I think you're going off the point of the question.'

Abraxas was watching them both, startled. 'I think I need to go to the library,' he said, standing up.

'You *think*?' Harry said.

Tom watched until he hurried away and then sat.

'You scared him away,' Harry said immediately.

'It's not my fault he knows when he's not wanted.'

'When he's –' Harry's mouth opened just a bit. 'That's not true.'

'Yes, it is.'

Tom leaned back in his chair and watched as he went back to writing. He was chewing his bottom lip in concentration, ignoring Tom's gaze, fingers smeared with ink. He looked at ease and not as though he was beside Lord Voldemort.

'What's on your hand?'

Harry looked up, quill slipping.

Tom reached out and grabbed his wrist, turning it over. On the back of his hand were faint white scars scratching out the words *I must not tell lies.*

Tom felt the wild urge to laugh and laugh and laugh.

'I must not tell lies,' he said, tracing his finger over the lines, even as Harry pulled away. 'That's the most ironic thing I have ever seen.'

He prised his hand from Tom's clasp but it was too late.

'Do you normally carve words into your own skin?'

'I didn't.' Jaw clenched. Defensive. *Delightful.*

'Oh?' Tom said, 'what happened then? A stray curse?'

There was a split-second of hesitation and Tom could almost see the thoughts flashing through his mind. 'A quill. As a punishment.'

'You're so generous with details.' Tom watched Harry *squirm.* 'So this lying – has it always been an issue for you?'

'I'm not a liar.' His eyes flashed. 'You have to try and twist everything, don't you?'

He was such a liar and he was so *lovely.*

'Only with a reason. Was it the Weasleys that made you use the quill? Or was it those dead parents?'

Harry's eyes narrowed. 'It was back in the cupboard days, actually. You remember those?'

Tom grinned. ‘I know you’re lying.’

'And why's that? Because of some scars?'

Tom cocked his head. He wanted to rip Harry apart and see what was inside. Destroy him, and have him, and everything in between. 'I just think your time-line’s a little . . . off.'

Harry twitched at the word ‘time-line’ but said nothing.

How much of it was fabricated? The stories about his childhood, the Weasleys . . .

The dreams must be real. The godfather falling behind the veil, the little boy in the cupboard, the dark, shadowy figure and the manic laughter. Tom. *Voldemort.*

It took a moment for Tom to realise Harry was frowning at him.

'You're acting strange,' he said and leaned forward, discarding the parchment around him. 'Stranger than usual at least.'

'Am I?'

What about you then, Harry? What are you planning?

'Yes,' Harry said. 'I don't know why you've suddenly got this crazy idea in your head –'

'You wouldn't believe it, really.'

'Exactly! *That.* Why so ominous?'

Tom paused.

Harry looked the epitome of genuine, with his eyes bright and his hands moving as he talked. He was so practiced in lying. Had he even convinced himself?

'I'm just wondering,' Tom said, 'do you have anything you want to share? Any secrets nagging at your subconscious?'

Harry shifted and his face became guarded. 'I don't think so,' he said, ‘do *you*?'

Tom smiled.

He wondered what was the best way to ruin Harry Potter. Would it be his friends? Would it be Dumbledore? Or would it be through letting everything he feared—everything he denied—happen right before his eyes, as he was helpless to stop it?

'Of course not,' Tom said.

The next person he ran into was Belinda. Belinda Lestrange, who had been avoiding him for weeks. What exactly had she talked to Harry about down that alleyway? What had sparked their sudden closeness, their sudden *secrecy?*

But Tom still had time to figure it out. He still had time, to let the pretence stay in place.

Patience.

'You're feeling better, I hope?' he said.

Belinda shrank back a little from him. 'Yes,' she said, slowly and carefully.

'That's good.'

He looked into her eyes and she met his gaze, allowing it. He thought he saw her shoulders dip, ever so slightly, before squaring. And her mind – clear and dull, like a white room with no pictures or windows – held nothing. A slight stab of fear, a smothering apprehension, a *weight* tugging him down. Miserable and pathetic and defeated.

An image of a young girl floated by, fair and pale.

'You don't remember anything?' he said.

Belinda shook her head. Tom thought she looked unwell: skin almost transparent, hair lank and loose. Or maybe it was just resignation. Either way, it didn't matter.

'Maybe soon,' he said.

'Maybe,' she echoed.

He looked at her for a moment, shoulders bent, head tilted. After everything, she was still pretending to be loyal.

'You may leave then.'

She hurried away, without looking up.

Tom allowed it.

Though his thoughts gravitated towards Harry, Tom didn't see him again that day. He talked to the Death-Eaters. Felt that reassuring pride—happiness? – at their loyal faces. Eager to please, unwavering in their beliefs. He felt pride. But was it enough?

I hope you manage to be satisfied. When your plans come through.

Tom would be satisfied. He would be satisfied with the world, and all the magic in it. Ruling, as the most powerful wizard of all time, and no-one able to match him, not even death. Tom would be satisfied, even if his thirst was too big to currently quench. Because right now he wasn't bored – in fact, seventh-year was probably the most interesting one of all.

It was late when he entered the dormitory but it hardly mattered. His Death-Eaters were in their beds, asleep. All his – so why didn't he care? Did he need more pawns? Hundreds of them, *thousands* of pureblood wizards bowing to him, would surely suffice.

He moved through the darkness silently, avoiding the squeaking floorboard. His mind was active – sleep was not happening tonight. He reached his four-poster and stopped. Peering into the darkness, he took several steps and pulled open Harry's curtains instead.

Startled eyes met his own. Harry sat up abruptly, looking as awake as Tom felt.

'Oh,' he said, just above a whisper. 'What are you doing, plotting some sort of murder? My scar's prickling.'

'You always think the worst,' Tom murmured, watching him twiddle with the duvet cover. Tom could imagine his face, slightly flushed,

slightly unsure. He could almost taste the guilt in the air. But now he could only see Harry, cast in silvery light.

‘Come and sleep with me,’ Tom decided.

Harry’s throat bobbed. He tried to speak several times and then nodded. His eyes were bright and conflicted and it was all so lovely.

‘What were you on about earlier,’ Harry said, wincing at the noise the mattress made. ‘With the secrets?’

Tom pulled his robes over his head. ‘I was joking,’ he said. ‘*Mostly*.’

Harry scoffed and Tom grinned to show he wasn’t being serious. The bed dipped as they got in.

‘Alright,’ Harry said, ‘I guess that will do for now.’

Tom lay on his side and looked at him. ‘For now,’ he said, ‘like everything else, then?’

Harry’s eyes, Tom thought, were very green.

‘Yeah. Exactly like that.’

He had no intention of letting him go so soon. Not when he finally had Harry, who was so strong and powerful and *willing*.

‘Kiss me,’ Tom said.

‘What?’ Harry’s voice rose a fraction and Tom saw his expression flicker in the half-light. ‘Can’t you – kiss me yourself!’

‘I want you to do it,’ Tom said.

He knows what you’ve done and he still likes you. Wants – this. Fights with himself, even now, in your *bed.*

How far could he push Harry until there was no going back? Until he had ruined him? Or Harry ruined himself?

‘You’re so *weird*,’ Harry hissed, ‘don’t just say these things. Do you get a kick out of making people do what you tell them?’

‘Yes,’ Tom said, beginning to smirk.

Harry’s face darkened.

Tom continued, letting the words roll effortlessly from his tongue. ‘But it’s not that, I want you to do it. Stop pretending you’re unwilling and deluding yourself.’

Harry’s jaw was still tight.

‘Why are you here then, Harry? In my bed?’

Tom thought that was the moment: Harry was going to get up and go back to his own four-poster. He hesitated. The mattress lifted and fell back down.

Then Harry sighed, shuffled closer, and brushed his lips against Tom’s. ‘You could at least say *please*.’

Tom touched his cheek. Felt steady, even breath against his own. Felt Harry *shiver*.

‘Where’s the fun in that?’

Harry leaned back, exhaling a huff of air and Tom saw his eyes were blown-wide.

‘I’m not playing mind-games,’ Harry said.

‘Alright.’ Tom touched his cheek again, feeling the heat of his skin.

Harry Potter. This was the boy who was meant to kill him.

His finger ghosted over his bottom lip and Harry’s breathing stilled. Tom kissed him, properly this time, and Harry no longer resisted. On the contrary, he leaned into it, compliant and easy. His fingers traced along Tom’s chest and descended, desperate.

You could kill him, Tom thought, with a steady pressure on his dick that had Harry groaning. As he breathed into the hollow of Harry’s neck and felt warm skin and a thumping pulse.

It would be so easy.

And Tom came, imagining stunned surprise and Harry’s airflow cutting off.

He would never see it coming.

They lay back down and this time Harry didn’t leave. Tom listened to his heart slow.

Trusting. Stupid.

Tom lay there, in the dark, even as Harry drifted off. Time passed, meaningless. The race of his mind had calmed now, no longer dizzying but clear. He could ruin Harry and it would be so *easy*. He deserved it, after all. It would be satisfying. Would it be enough?

Tom sat up and held his breath. How much time had passed? The dorm was brighter now, cast in shadows, and Harry didn't stir.

Tom looked at him, lax in sleep, tousled hair falling over his eyes. He reached out and smoothed it away. The scar was faint, nothing more than a thin, jagged white line. Tom pressed his finger against it and Harry mumbled something under his breath, eyebrows knitting together.

He planned to kill you.

Tracing the scar with his finger – with the tip of his nail – a jolt of electricity went through Tom's arm. The scar seemed to sear, hot, pulsing beneath his touch.

He watched Harry shift around, his face screw up –

He let go of his scar.

He had a theory. It was a theory based around nothing – around a few thoughts floating in Granger's bushy head. He and Harry were connected. A Killing Curse that rebounded, that hit Voldemort as well as Harry. Left a mark behind; a connection. It was the sort of theory he *knew* was true. It seeped into his head, pulsed under his fingers, and wouldn't go away.

They were connected, the two of them, through something much more than a spell. He had spent months researching; had found curses, and dark magic, and ridiculous things like soul mates and divination. It hadn't made *sense.*

But he knew it now, finally had an answer.

Tom looked into the dark and wasn't tired, not at all.

Harry was a horcrux.

Attempts at Normality

Harry knew Tom was hiding something. A plan, perhaps? A new idea to take over the world? Whatever it was, it was best to wait. Without any means of finding out, he could only wait and observe. Casting a dozen spells around his trunk became a frequent practice, as did only putting aside the invisibility cloak when strictly necessary.

November brought mounds of homework and perpetual rainfall. The pumpkins still decorated the Great Hall, glowing faintly during meals, and emitting screams every time thunder cracked overhead. It was amusing the first couple of times; by the end of the week, Harry was wishing someone would set them on fire.

The castle experienced a drop in temperature. Harry now had more sympathy for his former Slytherin classmates who spent most of their days in the draughty dungeons. Though the Common Room was the warmest part, Harry still thought wistfully of cosy Gryffindor with its bright atmosphere and crackling log fires.

He ran into Ron and Hermione in Charms on Monday.

'You've been avoiding us,' Hermione said bluntly.

'Yeah,' Harry agreed, wincing.

'And that's not even the fishiest thing,' Ron said, ‘I know we're not the best of mates right now, but you still need to know. We ran into *Riddle.'*

'You—' Harry stared at him, ‘you did what?'

They shared a quick look.

'So we were in the library,' Ron began, 'you know, looking at books and all that crap.'

'Finding books for homework.’

'Exactly. And we saw Riddle near the shelves, talked to him, actually. He's an alright bloke.'

Harry didn't say anything for a long moment, stomach plummeting. Maybe he was deaf, or they were cursed, nothing else could explain this nonsense. 'He's a *what* now?'

'He's nice enough.' Hermione shrugged. 'We were talking about Ancient Runes. He really understands the course material and well — it was fascinating. I don't usually have anyone to chat about runes with.'

'Sure you do,' Harry said slowly. 'There must be *one* other smart person in the class, you know, from Gryffindor, Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff.'

‘You’re Slytherin now,’ Ron said. ‘So what?’

‘So what? Have you gone mad?’

‘You’re allowed to befriend Tom Riddle but we’re not?’ Hermione leaned forward and set her wand on the wooden tabletop. ‘Aren’t you happy we’ve had a change of heart? You’re always telling us we don’t understand your house.’

‘Ron,’ Harry said, turning to him. ‘You’re joking. There’s no way you actually *like* Tom Riddle. He’s a git — a prick. And what do you even have in common? *Chess?’*

‘Probably,’ Ron said, ‘I bet he’d be good at chess.’

Harry stared for a moment. The classroom was full of loud chatter but he couldn’t hear it. He felt like he had suddenly stepped inside a ghost, the world cold, still, and surely not real.

‘You can’t like Riddle,’ he said, slower this time. ‘Either of you. It’s manipulation. He doesn’t care about you - he doesn’t care about *anyone*. He wants you to let your guard down and serve him in some way, you’re just falling for his trap. He’s killed people, and if you think he’s an *alright bloke* —'

‘Why then,’ Hermione said coolly, ‘are you the exception to your own advice?’

‘Because I get it! I know what he’s like. He’s been living in my head for years!’

Her eyebrows shot upwards but Harry went on. ‘I can’t ignore him the way you can. It’s always just been — Voldemort and me. Whereas you two, you can’t . . . ‘He broke off. His head was humming. The words were rushing forward before he even had a grasp on them. ‘You’re delusional.’

‘Nope,’ Ron said. ‘That’s all you.’

They shared another look, a confiding, sheepish one.

‘We know Riddle’s a piece of shit,’ Ron said. ‘We wanted to pretend he’d convinced us and played all the old tricks to see how you’d react.’

‘We thought you might have a different view,’ Hermione said. She was staring down at her intertwined fingers.

Harry laughed. ‘You thought I’d — what? Say we’ll all be best mates? Go to Hogsmeade together and ignore everything that’s happened?’

‘Well, put it this way,’ Ron said, ‘you spend all your time down in the dungeons and you’re always around him. *He* says something’s going on, even if you deny it.’

‘He said *what?*’ Harry’s mouth felt dry. ‘What exactly was he saying?’

‘Let’s all be friends, we all like Harry.’ Ron waved his hand. ‘Some rubbish like that. But it’s true, isn’t it? You spend all that time with him, you avoid us—'

‘Yeah, I know, I’m a nutjob. Not healthy, not normal. When has *anything* ever been?’

‘Don’t say that,’ Hermione said sharply. ‘Don’t you see what’s happened? You’re so in denial, you’ve convinced yourself you should spend time with him. And why? Because he’s Voldemort and you’re the Chosen One? What are you going to do, Harry, *understand* him?’

Harry said nothing, putting all his effort into maintaining his temper.

‘I don’t know,’ he said, ‘maybe I’ll find out something that will help me kill him. You know, with that suicide mission Dumbledore left. *Killing Voldemort,* just a normal day's work—'

‘You never doubted it before!’ Hermione said.

‘And I’ve never had a minute to think before! A minute away from everything to realise how *insane* it is. All my life, I’ve been fighting him and training to kill Voldemort. How’s that for normal?’

Hermione’s face softened but Harry turned away. He didn’t want her sympathy.

‘Don’t take your issues with Dumbledore out on us,’ Ron said. ‘If you

don’t know why he left you this job, go and talk to him.’

Harry laughed. ‘Slight problem. Unless I get back to the future, go to Hogwarts, and *climb inside his tomb*, I can’t exactly do that.’

‘This Dumbledore! I know it’s not the same thing but bloody close enough. Surely, he’ll have some ideas.’

‘He’s never dealt with Voldemort and the first war hasn’t even happened. There’s no prophecy, no Chosen One, no *surviving the Killing Curse —'*

‘You might be able to do it again.’

Harry looked at him for a second. ‘You really believe that?’

Ron nodded uncertainly.

‘I don’t,’ Harry said. ‘I don’t know what Dumbledore expects me to do, or how to open the stupid snitch. Or even when the horcruxes are gone, how to win the duel. Because a seventeen-year-old against a Dark Lord? The only way is a fluke. The wands acting up, or catching him off guard . . . ' He trailed off.

‘He has a plan,’ Harry said, heart beginning to race. ‘He must, he knows I can’t beat him. There’s something we don’t know, something that will help.’

‘Guess we’ll ask his corpse then,’ Ron said.

They sat in silence. Hermione had turned away from both of them, still looking at her hands, and Ron was leaning towards her, the distance suddenly enormous.

They practised their spell-work in silence. Took down the homework from the board. And when the bell rang, went separate ways.

'Did you see?' Abraxas said. ‘A Patronus! I actually did it this time!'

Harry hadn't. Truthfully, he had been too busy ignoring the prickly silence with Ron and Hermione and the thoughts of all the things they didn't know. It would ruin their friendship. It would be the end.

'What was it?' Harry said.

'What — a dog! You didn't see? It was a wolfhound or something.'

'I thought you said it was a unicorn before.'

'Well, that was *before*. You know, when it wasn't corporeal.'

'Yeah,' Harry agreed, 'dogs and unicorns – practically the same thing, aren't they? What did Flitwick think?'

'He was really impressed, none of the other Slytherins managed it. They've given up actually, they don't think it's a good reflection of your character.'

Harry frowned. 'That's the most crap I've ever heard. They'll change their story when they run into a Dementor.'

'Why on earth would you run into a dementor?'

Harry shrugged. 'If you get sent to Azkaban. You know, for being involved with Voldemort.'

He regretted the words immediately, which prompted another round of frantic questions: *'You think that would really happen?' 'Harry, Voldemort isn't going to be* caught.'

When they reached the Great Hall, the rain had cleared and the sky was grey and cloudy. Belinda spotted them and came through the throng of students, her face pallid. She looked like she hadn't been sleeping.

'They've found a piece of evidence,' she said, handing Abraxas a scrunched piece of parchment. 'Against my father. It's not enough but it's – it's something. They're going to vanish somewhere, and I'm going to be here –' She shook her head.

Harry wondered how she kept her voice so toneless, even now.

'Anyway, they told me to keep quiet. If they have to leave, I know what to do. Marry Arnoldo and never see Claudia again.' She repeated it, flat, dull, like a mantra. Her eyes were very bright, however. Glistening. Harry glanced down, feeling like an intruder.

'You can come and live with me,' Abraxas said. All the humour had left his voice and remaining was something raw. 'You know, before — '

'Don't be ridiculous. You think your parents would like that? Disgraced little Belinda ruining the family name?'

'They like you,' Abraxas protested.

It sounded weak even to Harry.

The conversation awoke something in his head, something he tried not to think of. What if they didn't get back to the future before the school year ended? They had no money, no relatives and nowhere to live.

'Guess we'll all be living in the muggle world,' he said, 'homeless.'

Neither of them laughed.

'Muggles,' Belinda said, and her face twisted. 'No way.'

'Yeah, Harry,' Abraxas said, 'what would we eat? Do they have houses? Or *jobs?'*

Harry sighed. 'Yes,' he said, but they continued to look doubtful. 'I was only joking.'

He didn't want to think about Ron and Hermione but he couldn't help it. Had they thought of the future and the possibility they might not get back?

The thought of lunch was no longer appealing.

In the Common Room that evening, Slughorn announced that the next Hogsmeade trip was cancelled. With the last one still fresh in his mind, Harry looked at Belinda, who was twisting her ring absently. He saw Tom over her head, lounging near the fireplace, a little detached from everyone else. When Slughorn spoke, it seemed to be directly to him.

'We don't think it's safe . . . still haven't found anyone that could have been involved . . . if anyone knows anything and they're not saying . . . '

Rosier stared over at Harry, face a mixture of anger and excitement. The moment Slughorn left – telling them to get an early night – he strode over.

'So, Potter,' he began, 'first you come to our school. Then you *ruin* it.'

'*So* sorry,' Harry said, 'Hogsmeade's cancelled. Whatever will we do?'

'This isn't just about Hogsmeade. You've been here long enough, prattling on with your stupid ideas and feigning ignorance of everything happening. It's time you join us or leave us.'

There was a glint in his beady eye, and Harry met his gaze head-on. He laughed.

'Wow, I'm impressed. How long did it take you to come up with that one? A week?'

'You just think you're so fucking clever—'

'And what are you going to do? I'm not going to join your Death Eater cult. *Ever.* So go on, Rosier, kick me out of the House.'

People were watching now, shuffling around in their seats, quieting down. From across the room, Harry felt Tom's gaze as though it burned.

'You're nothing more than a disgusting half-blood. No money, no family, no name. You're *nothing,* Potter, and you're walking around here like you own the place.'

'Right then,' Harry said, *'do something.'*

He waited. Rosier faltered.

'Exactly,' Harry said. 'You're all talk, aren't you? Go on, cast something. Or do you need your little Death Eater pals to hold the wand for you? Are you even capable of *that*?'

'Watch your dirty mouth –'

'No,' Harry said, 'you've proven your point. Glare at me across the room. It's not like you can *do* anything.'

He saw hatred — real hatred — flare in his eyes. 'You don't fit in here,' Rosier hissed. 'And one day, you'll wish you had the Gryffindors to save you. You'll wish you *died* when Grindelwald killed your dirty mudblood family.'

'I'm looking forward to it,' Harry said.

Rosier stared at him, his wand tight in his trembling hand, his nostrils flaring. ‘Does anyone else think Potter needs to be taught a lesson?’ he roared, 'he’s a half-blood, pretending he’s something special! He’s an *embarrassment!’*

The entire Common Room was paying attention now. At the words, Avery began nodding. Harry gave him a look and he faltered.

‘Tom,’ Rosier said. ‘My lord. You don’t *actually* think Potter can just go around doing as he pleases? Everything we believe in, he goes against. He’s a *traitor.’*

Tom didn’t look surprised at being addressed. ‘Whatever Harry may be doesn’t concern you,’ he said. ‘Right now, Edwin, you’re the embarrassment.’

Rosier flushed a dull red. ‘You’re – you’re going to defend him? Really?’

Tom’s eyes narrowed. ‘Are you testing my judgement?’

The Common Room was deathly silent and Rosier blanched.

‘Do you think, perhaps, you should be in charge? Why, you’re so authoritative, Edwin, I see why Harry’s so afraid.’ Tom’s lips curved into a very cold smile.

‘N - n - no,’ Rosier stammered, ‘of course I’m not questioning you. I’m sure you have your — reasons.’

‘Indeed,’ Tom said, ‘but I am beginning to question my reasons for having you around. Tell me, have you ever heard of the term *dead weight?’*

‘No, please, I didn’t mean to question you. My Lord, my Lord —'

‘But that is what you did,’ Tom said softly. ‘Do you want my forgiveness?’

‘Please.’ Rosier came forward desperately and then — to Harry’s utter disbelief — dropped to his knees.

Tom glanced down at him, expression not flickering. ‘You want forgiveness but forgiveness is something that has to be earned. Have you earned my forgiveness, Edwin? Are you worthy?’

‘I — I —' Rosier’s words were said to the dark hem of Tom’s robes,

who took a step away. Surveying the room, he said, ‘does anyone think Rosier is worthy of being one of us? A Slytherin, a friend, and a Death Eater?’

No-one said anything. Harry watched Tom, as he casually stepped past Rosier’s knelt form, every part of him radiating a dark, magnetic energy. Harry couldn’t look away even if he wanted to.

‘But I am forgiving,’ Tom said softly, ‘when lessons are learned and mistakes aren’t repeated. Have you learned your lesson?’

‘Yes!’ Rosier looked up, his face very red. ‘I’ve learned my lesson. Please, my lord.’

‘But I don’t think you have.’

As Tom stepped towards him, Rosier’s face flickered in fear.

‘Who thinks Rosier needs a reminder of what happens when you speak out of turn and let your confidence give you false authority? What about you, Harry? After all, it was your character he was slandering. Would you like to see to his punishment?’

Harry looked at Tom and then Rosier, who was staring at him with that all familiar hatred. He saw the people in the Common Room, leaning away from the conflict, from the power Tom radiated. Everyone was watching – fearfully, carefully — but Harry looked straight at Tom, a smile quirking his lips. ‘Punish him however you see fit,’ he said. ‘*My lord.’*

Surprise flashed through Tom’s eyes, vanishing in a split second. ‘Very well.’ He smiled down at Rosier. ‘I’ve had enough of your babbling. You question *me*, Edwin, which is a very foolish mistake. I believe it’s time you think before you speak. Could you do that? Carefully decide the cost of speaking, evaluate each word, and think of the consequences that follow?’

Rosier looked confused. ‘Of course, my lord.’

‘You can decide then.’ He leaned over and placed the tip of his wand on Rosier’s head. After murmuring something, Tom stood. ‘You decide when your lesson is learned. Defiance is a . . . terrible thing.’ He looked at Harry and a smile flickered over his lips. For a second, it was just them.

Rosier staggered to his feet, his lips half-forming the word ‘thanks.'

Face contorting, he hunched forward, mouth open in a silent scream.

Harry watched, horrified and fascinated, as he doubled-over.

‘Lord Voldemort is forgiving,’ Tom said. He didn’t smile this time. ‘For all those who stand beside him.’

It was too much, too familiar. Harry no longer wanted to be there, not listening to this, not with those loyal faces all around. Not with that smooth, assured voice; the air heavy with fear and respect and something so horribly intimate.

‘Do you see why you shouldn’t get on his bad side now?’ Abraxas said, when the silence broke. Rosier had hurried out of the Common Room, entrance creaking behind him.

‘Who, *Tom*?’ Harry shook his head. ‘I wish I handled Rosier myself. He’s not a threat and that was just a spectacle.’

‘He could become a threat. But I didn’t think he would really —' he shuddered.

‘Do you think he deserved it?’ Harry said, ‘Rosier?’

Abraxas hesitated and Belinda leaned forward to listen.

‘I don’t think it’s any of my business,’ he said finally.

‘I think he did,’ Belinda said, ‘you shouldn’t feel bad, Harry. He’s always calling you a blood-traitor and insulting your family.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry agreed. ‘But I had a choice, didn’t I? I let Tom do it.’

‘He would have done it anyway,’ Abraxas said. They had to lean forward to make out his next words. ‘Insulting half-bloods is insulting him. And you don’t want to get on Tom’s bad side.’

Belinda looked thoughtful. ‘I don’t know. I think it’s because he *likes* Harry.’ She raised her eyebrows meaningfully but Harry gave her a quick, dark look.

‘I could have handled Rosier,’ he said, ‘Tom shouldn’t have been involved.’

‘You did sound like him,’ Belinda said.

‘What?’

‘When you were talking to Edwin you sounded just like Tom.’

Harry looked at Abraxas and found him nodding. ‘It was scary, actually,’ he said, ‘you just didn’t seem . . . bothered.’

‘Well, it’s *Rosier.* He’s not a threat.’

‘I’d say a few people would disagree,’ Belinda said, ‘and I’d say they’ll think *you’re* a threat.’

‘Good,’ he said. ‘All I want is for people to leave me alone.’

Walking across the dorm, Tom’s footsteps barely made a sound. A smile was playing around his lips, curving it into something sharp and wonderful, and his cheekbones were flushed pink. ‘I liked your little display,’ he said, ‘with Rosier.’

‘It wasn’t a display,’ Harry said, trying not to think about Tom’s lovely, lit up face, or how he looked possibly radiant at his most sadistic.

‘Everything that happens in the Common Room’s a display. Wouldn’t you agree? *My lord?*’

‘Maybe it was slightly for display,’ Harry said, ‘I bet you loved it, though.’

‘I *do*.’

Harry smirked a bit. He wasn’t playing Tom’s games, not indulging in his power fantasies. ‘When will you lift the curse on Rosier?’ he said.

‘Whenever he learns his lesson.’

‘So never? The professors will find out that he can’t *speak.’*

Tom shrugged. ‘That sounds like his problem, not mine.’

It sounds like what your vow would do to Belinda if she ever revealed the truth about you.

‘That’s harsh,’ Harry said.

‘You should be grateful. He was insulting you, after all.’

‘And you’re just *so* charming. I’d be really grateful if you cancelled the Death Eaters though.’

Tom scoffed. ‘That will never happen.’

‘I’m not grateful then.’ A thought occurred to him. 'Ron and Hermione told me you were talking to them. *Why?*'

'We met in the library. It was only manners, dear.'

Harry narrowed his eyes. ‘Since when do you do things out of *manners?* I said to leave them alone.’

'You value them more than yourself,' Tom said. ‘Of course.'

Harry bristled. 'They don't need to deal with whatever form of manipulation gives you entertainment –'

'I wondered about that,' Tom said. ‘*Them.* I thought you would be similar. You’re ever so close.’

Harry’s face betrayed nothing. 'And are we?’ he said, ‘similar?'

'No, they're nothing like you. They don't have the same defiance, the same power — the same spark. They aren't compelling.'

He said it so seriously that Harry flushed. 'You must have been disappointed.’

'I suspected it. I don't think there's anyone truly like you, Harry.'

Harry's mouth was dry and he looked away from Tom and the intensity of his expression. 'You should meet more people then. I'm sure you'll find a couple million.'

'I doubt it. You fascinate me, Harry, more than anyone else.'

'Nice,' Harry said. ‘Slightly creepy but I appreciate it.' His face was hot. His insides squirmed. 'Why *are*you being nice, anyway? Trying to steer the subject away from Ron and Hermione?'

'Aren't I usually nice?'

Harry scoffed. ‘I won’t even answer that.’

'Maybe I'm in a good mood.'

Harry gave him a doubtful look. 'Your good moods involve gloating or killing, there's no in-between.'

Tom hummed. 'That's true,' he said, looking oddly pleased. 'But I don't have any sinister motives today.'

Harry didn't believe it. Tom looked too innocent, too sincere, all too carefully fabricated. He was *lying*, so easily.

'What about none sinister ones?' Harry said.

'Many. Would you like to hear them all or just the ones that involve you?'

'I know you're trying to distract me.'

He *was* hiding something but Harry couldn't decide if it was typical Tom or something more dangerous. If he pressed and prodded and persisted . . . well, what if Tom did the same back?

'Is it working?' Tom's smile was easy now: a touch meaner, a touch sharper, and it made Harry's insides stir against his will. 'Or do you need a better distraction?'

'Better. Definitely better.'

Stepping into his space, Tom's fingers cupped Harry's jaw. Harry felt the heat of his breath, the brush of his soft hair, the press of his long, nimble fingers. And deep down he knew, as familiar as his own name and far more painful: *I'm a terrible person.*

With Saturday, the showers ended. Between weak winter sunshine, everyone made their way to the Quidditch Pitch for the second match of the year: Hufflepuff versus Gryffindor. Harry felt strange seeing the Gryffindors -- seeing them kick off from the ground, streaks of scarlet and gold -- knowing he wasn't one of them. It was even odder being in the Slytherin stands, amongst the wash of green and silver.

'I wish we were playing,' Abraxas said. 'You know my father's coming to the next match?'

Harry tore his eyes away from the game where the commentary was beginning.

' . . . Prewett with the Quaffle. Bones! Darcy intercepts! And ten points to Gryffindor!'

'That means we have to win, yeah?'

Abraxas' smile tightened. 'Yes,' he said, 'that's what he'll expect.'

Harry felt a sudden bout of gratefulness for the Weasleys. He had never dealt with family pressure before — the Dursleys hadn't expected anything from him, only to stay out of sight.

'He'll be watching me,' Abraxas said, 'think I can score at least five goals?'

His tone was light, unbothered, but Harry wasn't fooled.

'Course,' he said, 'and I won't catch the snitch until you do.'

Abraxas' shoulders loosened and he let out a ragged breath. 'Okay then,' he said, giving him a grateful look. 'We'll do that.'

They quickly got distracted by the game.

' . . . *and McKinnon sees the Quaffle! Oh, a bludger from Hufflepuff! That looks nasty!'*

The Hufflepuff stands erupted in cheers but Harry's eyes were glued to the Seekers, who appeared to be having an argument mid-air.

'Has anyone seen Lucretia?' Belinda leaned over Harry, engulfing him in her apple-scented hair. She was wrapped in a long, emerald cloak with a shawl up to her chin. 'She didn't come.'

Abraxas shook his head distractedly but Harry frowned.

He remembered what Tom had said. Prewett, the boy they had caught her with, was on the Gryffindor team. 'No,' he said, 'I haven't seen her either.'

The whistle blew when one of the Gryffindor chasers knocked into an opposing Beater.

'That's completely unfair!' Abraxas said, jumping up from his seat with a roar. 'They barely even *touched.*'

'Shouldn't you be happy?' Harry said, 'aren't you supporting Hufflepuff?'

'I really hope no-one is actually supporting Hufflepuff.' Tom's smooth voice was easily distinguishable in the crowd, and the sound of it made Abraxas finally tear his eyes away.

'Of course not,' he said, Adam's apple bobbing.

'Quidditch is a stupid sport,' Belinda agreed.

Abraxas glanced at her, wounded, but Tom nodded his head. 'I agree,' he said, 'but everyone likes a bit of house pride.'

'I'm supporting Gryffindor,' Harry said.

Silence. All three of them turned to look at him incredulously.

'Of course you are,' Tom said flatly. 'Do you want them to win the House Cup too?'

'No, I'm hoping Ravenclaw will. They deserve a win.'

'They won *last year*,' Abraxas interjected.

'Really? They're not arrogant at all.' He fought hard to keep his face straight and Tom scoffed.

'It's no wonder Edwin calls you a traitor, Harry. I'm starting to believe he's correct.'

Abraxas and Belinda both stiffened in their seats but Harry raised his eyebrows.

'Maybe you should have agreed with him then. It's a bit late to change your mind now.'

'I could change my mind,' Tom said.

'And exile me to Gryffindor? Let's face it, you'd be devastated.'

'Possibly distraught,' Tom agreed. 'I can't begin to imagine it. Silence, peace –'

Harry waved a hand. 'That's *boring.'*

'Maybe,' Tom said, 'or maybe it's exactly what Slytherin needs.'

‘Slytherin needs to *lighten up* and you know it – ‘

At that moment the game started again: a penalty to Hufflepuff. Abraxas jumped up to join the cheering, his eyes flickering between Tom and the match in a clear struggle.

‘Try not to go deaf, Harry,’ Tom said mildly. He nodded at the others and moved back to his seat.

When he was gone, Belinda turned to face Harry, her expression bright and knowing. ‘No-one else talks to him like that,’ she said.

‘*And?*’

'He wouldn't let them, it’s not even in the *realms* of possibility. You're different.'

Abraxas sat back down. 'Actually,' he said, 'I was thinking that as well. What's going on between you two?'

'Nothing.’

'Defensive much?' Belinda said.

Abraxas was no longer watching the match. ‘Oh, come on, Harry!’ he said, 'I've never seen Tom pay that much attention to anyone. Nothing that goes on here applies to you, Rosier’s right. You can't say it’s *nothing*.'

Harry was flustered. 'I’m the new student?’ he tried. ‘And I guess no-one's challenged him before. But he’ll become bored eventually. We'll probably end up killing each other.'

Abraxas' eyes widened. 'Don't say that.'

'Is maiming better?'

‘Stop dodging the question.’ Belinda leaned forward. 'Would you say you are *friends?*'

'Er —'

He had the horrible urge to laugh. He could still remember the taste of Tom’s mouth, of his skin, the sleepy scratch of his voice.

'Friends is a strong word.'

She frowned. 'I said trust yourself, Harry, not blind yourself.'

'I haven't.'

'Just ... admit some things to yourself at least. Because if you don't, it’s dangerous. And it will backfire.'

‘Like your plans did?'

She flinched and Harry's sharp stab of pleasure disappeared. Ears ringing with the roar of the game, he said, ‘sorry, I didn't mean –'

'I shouldn't have prodded.’ She held up her hands. ‘And it’s the truth.’

That just made Harry feel worse.

'I'm not blind,’ he said, and touched his glasses. ‘See?’

Abraxas laughed. Belinda smiled ruefully. And none of them were fooled in the slightest.

Rounds

Gryffindor's win meant that the Slytherin team trained harder than ever. The next match would take place after the Christmas holidays, which gave them ample time to prepare.

Like a whisper in his mind, Harry was acutely aware that the prospect of going home was getting slimmer and slimmer. It went around and around his head, NEWTs and money, and *finishing school.* But going back – no matter how long it took – wasn't a concept of *if* but of *when*. That thought was what he held onto more than anything else.

'I want to test out spells with you again,' Tom said. He was standing over the table, one pale hand resting on the desk, and Harry looked up, the books in front of him swimming. He flexed his fingers, stiff and cramped, and wondered how much time had passed, how long he'd been zoned out, wrapped up in his head, absorbing pointless information.

'Why?' he said, when Tom sat down across from him. 'It's not going to help you when you're a Dark Lord. We're not going to be working together or anything like that. It's pointless.'

Tom frowned, eyes flickering from the books to Harry. 'You're in a bad mood,' he said.

'No, this is me overjoyed. Can't you tell?'

Tom scoffed, leaning forward, reading the spine on Harry's book. 'Aren't you happy Gryffindor won? I thought that was your wish.'

'Delighted,' Harry said, 'I even tried to join the party but they didn't want Slytherins in the Common Room.'

'You should have run to your beloved Dumbledore. He would have sorted it out for you.'

Harry said nothing, staring down at his books with the wild urge to set them on fire. He wondered what Tom would do then. Probably nothing. Laugh.

Admit some things to yourself at least. Because if you don't, it's dangerous. It will backfire.

'What are you going to do after school, Tom? Recruit more Death-

Eaters?'

Tom gave him a strange look. 'I want to become the Defence teacher,' he said slowly. 'Professor Merrythought's retiring this year.'

Harry had forgotten about that. He rubbed a hand over his face. What was he expecting – Borgin and Burkes?

'They'll say you're too young.'

'Is that something you know then? Or are you guessing?'

'It's *obvious*. It doesn't matter how talented you are, how many professors you flatter, no-one will hire an eighteen-year-old. The students will remember you. You can't just change that *dynamic* and become a professor to people you were in school with.'

Tom shrugged and if Harry didn't *know* he would have been sure Tom was unbothered. He was though, a slight muscle clenching in his jaw. 'And you're going to join the Auror academy, I assume? They'll hire someone with no background, no status and only one year of formal education?' He smiled. 'Or will it be *Quidditch?'*

'You don't think I've thought of that?' Harry said, fingers restlessly tapping the wood. 'I don't know anymore. Leaving Hogwarts —' he pulled a face.

It seemed wrong. All his life, Hogwarts had been *home.* Where he met his friends, had all his best memories, finally *became* someone. The castle had shaped and moulded and twisted him, and without it . . .

What was he without it? Dudley's cousin? The relative the Dursleys didn't want? Just *Harry?*

'I know what you mean,' Tom said quietly.

Harry looked at him then. He supposed Tom *did* know, was perhaps the only person who understood. Before, every similarity they shared — every link to Voldemort — had repulsed him, but this brought a strange sort of comfort.

'Well, I hope you get the Defence position then,' he said and paused. 'Actually, I don't. You'll turn all the students into Death Eaters and have them call you *Professor Voldemort.'*

'You know all my plans, don't you, Harry?' Beneath the smile, beneath

the easy humour, was something more. Something dark, *knowing*, goading Harry into saying more.

"I know how your mind works most of the time.'

'You have it all figured out?'

'Not all of it.' Harry licked his lips. He felt like he had suddenly prodded an angry dragon and wasn't backing away. 'You're impulsive. Secretive.'

'That sounds like *you*.'

'You think you're above everyone. Your arrogance is how you'll get caught.'

'And you'll be the one to do it then, dear?'

Harry's chest was uncomfortably tight. It was as if he was wearing the locket horcrux – as though it was resting over his heart, constricting his airflow, tightening and squeezing with every steady *bump*of his heart.

'I never said that.'

'It seems fitting though, doesn't it? Everything coming back to us. You and I, Harry, in the end.'

Harry couldn't have moved if he wanted to. His mouth – his words – what could he say? Tom's eyes were bright and fervent and he spoke as though he believed it. Harry reckoned he did — reckoned Tom would get a thrill out of that, both of them blood-slick, on the brink of death, *HarryandTom* as the world fell apart, as everything went green and bright and blinding.

. . . and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not . . .

It had been a prophecy. That was why Voldemort had gone after him.

'You always say the most dramatic things.' Harry's voice wavered a bit and he cleared his throat. He hoped Tom didn't notice, knew he must have, with the intensity of his gaze, the hungry way his eyes searched Harry's face. 'There's no fate, or destiny, or things set to happen. It comes down to *choice.'*

'You believe that?' Tom leaned forward, and Harry cursed the small

table, the library, the way his head was spinning, the way Tom could capture his attention with a *look*. ‘I think it’s going to be. Us.’

Harry wanted to swallow and couldn’t quite manage. They were silent for a beat too long. ‘Like I said, so dramatic.’

The air *hummed* with something unspoken, something resting between them, unacknowledged, flickering in and out of life.

‘Deny it.’ Tom’s voice was low and assured. ‘If you think it will help.’

Harry didn’t. He rolled his eyes at him, pushed his chair back and looked out the library window. The forest was murky in the distance, a ghostly shape blanketed in thick mist.

‘Let’s go and practice spells then,’ he said, ‘and you can keep your grand illusions of the future even if it’s all for nothing.’

He lifted his books, felt the heavy parchment, the weight, and snapped them shut.

‘Isn’t that what all of this is?’ Tom said, ‘for nothing? What’s the point of having brother wands if you do nothing with them?’

Harry hummed, stowing his bag. ‘See you in the future then,’ he said, ‘you know, when you *die.’*

Tom’s smile was sharp. ‘I look forward to it.’

Harry felt as though someone had torn carelessly through his mind, leaving behind tatters of memories, exposed thoughts and strings of emotions that swirled fruitlessly around.

He and Tom were similar. The same in many ways. And now the prophecy was rattling through his head and when he thought of it he didn't see Voldemort but *Tom*, with his knowing eyes and his curved lips, his cold face, the Elder Wand dangling between his slender fingers.

Harry didn't bring it up again and Tom didn't either. By the time he went to bed – staring at the dark, fuzzy ceiling and the shapes the blackness made – It was no longer at the forefront of his mind.

A feeling now. A sense. *It has to end soon.*

He woke, feeling as though he hadn't slept at all. His duvet was hanging half on the floor, and he shivered, fumbling around for his glasses.

It had to end soon but that day wasn't today. And Tom . . .

Harry found the glasses, ran a hand through his rumpled hair.

There would be no point giving it up now. Not when he was around Tom, living in the same dorm as him, drawn into his bubble of energy no matter what he did.

His reflection mocked him as he got dressed. Had he always looked that guilty? That shifty?

Liar, it said, *Liar, Liar, Liar.*

'You're looking peaky – you haven't been dabbling in funny magic, have you, dearie?'

As Harry jumped and swore, the mirror tutted.

'Well, I never! And the last young man in here wouldn't answer me either. You're a rude crowd, aren't you?'

'Pretty rude, yeah.'

Denial. Is that how the Death Eaters began? Had Snape lied to himself too? Had Regulus Black?

Through the doors and across the Great Hall. Sat.

'Pass the eggs would you, Harry?'

Slid them over to Abraxas. Stared down at his empty plate without seeing it.

'Did you see Edwina fought with Rosalind? Hexed her pretty nasty, I heard.'

A snicker. Another voice chiming in. Something about a sheep.

'Are you having some sort of crisis?'

Tom's voice was closer, quieter, and not overly bothered.

‘Something like that,’ Harry said, snagging a piece of hot toast from the rack in the centre. ‘Why, concerned?’

It was so much easier when Harry *hated* him. When he looked at Tom and felt revulsion, not a stirring of his insides, a sort of dizzying lightness.

‘Terribly,’ Tom agreed, ‘a slow descent into madness. Whatever will I do?’

‘Fake some tears.’ Harry reached for the tea-pot. Their fingers touched and a thrill went through his arm. He snatched it back.

‘I’ll give it my best performance’ Tom said. ‘You look tired. *Are* you tired, Harry?’

‘Nope,’ he said, ‘I slept great actually.’

Tom grinned and his teeth were *sharp.* ‘You’d sleep better with me.’

Harry almost cricked his neck glancing around the table. Abraxas was talking loudly with Belinda. Lucretia and Alphard were arguing over jam.

‘What – with one eye open? Wand in hand?’

‘I’d never attack you in your *sleep.*’

Harry made a doubtful noise. ‘Yeah, because you’re such a saint, Tom.’ And then – against his will – he yawned.

Tom’s grin broadened and suddenly Harry was very awake. His heart quickened, just a bit.

‘You’re not quite as good as you like to pretend either, Harry. You think you have me all figured out but I know you too.’

‘Lies,’ Harry said, ‘I thought I was some sort of puzzle for you to solve? Isn’t that your twisted form of entertainment?’

‘How do you know I haven’t figured it out already?’

Harry stared at him. ‘Because you’d be *bored a*nd you’re clearly as annoying as ever. Why, Tom, suddenly starting to like me?’

A strange look passed over Tom’s face but before Harry had a chance to decipher it, Abraxas was settling down beside him. ‘Hey, Harry –

did you do Dumbledore's homework?'

Harry jumped, staring at Tom who was already focusing on something else.

'Yeah,' he said distractedly, 'Wait, you *didn't?'*

He was more aware of Tom than ever. Aware of him, as they sat together in classes. Aware of the way his eyebrows furrowed in deep thought, the way his hand moved as he wrote. Of how their knees touched under the table, and the various ways he laughed, emotionless and charming, harsh and sharp and real. And Harry was aware, ridiculously so, of how in over his head he was.

'Are you going to take that curse off Rosier?'

The Common Room was at its busiest with curfew beginning. Students were crowded together on sofas, perched on the arms, sitting cross-legged on the floor and leaning up to talk to their friends. By the fire, Harry and Tom were slightly apart from everyone else.

Untouchable. That's what Tom was. He looked it, too, carried it with a proud, haughty air, and Harry was only aware of the space, the itch in his fingers, the urge to do the forbidden.

'Has he said anything to you?'

'To *me*?' Harry said. 'In case you don't know, he can't exactly talk.'

'Oh, he can. It just causes . . . immense pain.'

Harry barely resisted his lips twitching. Scanning the crowd, he found Rosier, who — to his surprise — was staring back. Arching an eyebrow, Harry met his eyes coolly until Rosier glanced away.

'You should be careful,' Harry said, 'you don't push him too far.'

'*Why*?' Tom said. 'You think I care if Rosier is loyal to me, Harry? I don't care for him.'

'It could start a rebellion.'

'He's a sheep. Rosier wouldn't start anything if his life depended on it.'

'Inspire one then.'

'It would never. If I push Rosier too far . . . 'he shrugged. 'It will hardly be a loss.'

Harry leaned backwards in his chair and let the heat of the fire blaze against his face. 'Fear will only get you so far. Humiliation, punishment — that instils the wrong sort of loyalty, the sort that can be broken.'

'It will get me far enough. And I have many other means of getting what I want.' As if to prove this, he smiled – that fake, dazzling one – and nudged Harry's leg with his own.

Harry laughed. 'You're going to seduce your Death Eaters? Actually, out of all your crazy plans that's not even the most far-fetched.'

Tom looked smug and even though Harry knew it was untrue, knew he didn't care for them, saw them as nothing more than pawns –

'Don't.'

'Why not? Jealous?'

'No, but you shouldn't play with them that much, it's sadistic.'

'What if they know they're being played with?' He lowered his voice. 'What if they *like it?'*

'Why would they like being part of your twisted mind games?'

'Why do you?'

'Because –' Harry paused and realised he was caught in a trap. 'I know what you're *like.* I don't have any hopeless expectations that you're a kind Dark Lord who will save us from evil muggles. They'd be completely out of their depth if you forced them into some weird game where you *pay attention* and listen to what they say. They'd probably faint. Or cry.'

Tom smirked. 'I'd never play games you aren't willing to, Harry.'

'Yeah, right. I guarantee that you have at least five murder plans right now and yet everyone still thinks you're perfect.'

‘Well, I basically *am.*’

‘Only a few minor flaws,’ Harry said dryly, ‘you know, little things. Practically irrelevant, really.’

‘You call them flaws, I call them personality traits.’

‘Of course you do. Is a thirst for murder a personality trait too?’

They sat there for a moment. Tom was watching him lazily, absently pressing his leg against Harry’s.

'I don't want any of the others,’ he said, quite casually, as though he was talking about the weather. 'Only you.'

'Lucky me. Tom Riddle’s undivided attention, what a *gift.*’

He wasn’t thinking of anything right then, shoving all itchy, jumpy thoughts to the back of his mind. Who cared if he was in over his head and actually liked Tom? That was *his* problem.

‘Can you *not* stare at me?’ Harry said, ‘I know I’m charming and all but it's unnerving. What are you expecting — a grand love declaration?’

‘Well, if that’s how you feel . . .’

‘It really isn’t. Maybe I *tolerate* you and your weird obsessive tendencies. Happy now?’

Tom laughed, leaning forward in his seat. ‘Harsh,’ he said, and Harry could see the flames flickering in his eyes, the dark curl of his eyelashes, the flush of his cheekbones. Tom’s voice dropped. His hand was resting on Harry’s leg, toying with the fabric along his thigh. 'Are you tired?'

‘Yeah,’ Harry said. A second passed. Tom’s face was still intense, still *burning* and his fingers were inching further up Harry's leg.

‘You should go to bed then,’ he said. ‘I have rounds to do.’

Harry reeled back. 'Why are you such a dick all the time –’

Tom stood. His face finally crumbled, and he was grinning, wicked. ‘Or you could join me. Unless I'm a *dick.'*

'You *are,*' Harry said, and got up as well. 'I'm coming.'

As they walked through the darkened halls, Harry sensed Tom beside him. He could make out the sharp shape of his body, hear the faint rustle of his robes, see the way his face flickered in and out of orange torchlight with its all too familiar *look*.

‘Are you alright there, Harry?’

The words were a faint brush, closer than he realised. He couldn’t see Tom now, not with their wands lighting the stone floor in front, but he heard the grin in his voice, the careful, teasing edge.

‘Just great,’ he murmured. Pale moonlight spilled through the windows casting long shapes. He knew Tom was smirking.

By the time they finished the first floor, Harry was aware of his own skin and how every slight touch made it burn. His head was light and Tom kept brushing against him, curling his fingers in the material of Harry’s robes.

‘You’re not as distracting as you think you are,’ Harry said, as Tom traced a finger along the exposed skin of his forearm.

‘Oh? And I was going to suggest we skip the second-floor too. Pity, I suppose.’

‘A real shame,’ Harry agreed. He could feel the heat of Tom’s breath near his face, see his pale, handsome face, twisted in something sharp.

‘Harry,’ Tom said, drawing his name out, still ghosting a finger along his arm.

Harry smirked. ‘I can’t believe you dragged me out here because you’re horny.’

‘Oh, you’re unwilling now? Well, I suppose I could always find someone else.’ His tone was sly, *mean*, and Harry’s heart spiked.

‘Go ahead,’ he breathed, ‘I dare you.’

‘Are you sure? It would be easy.*’*

They stopped walking. Tom’s face was shrouded in darkness but Harry

could make out every wicked, lovely line of it. He felt Tom's finger brush his cheek, a thumb experimentally rest on his bottom lip.

'Your options are Peeves, those fourth years in the broom closet, and your death-eaters if you go back to the common room.'

The pressure was light, the barest hint, just enough for Harry to be aware of it, to unconsciously shift forward and part his lips a fraction.

Tom hummed. 'Or,' he said, 'there's an empty classroom over here. But I suppose if you're so against the idea –'

'I think I can be persuaded.'

'I think you already *are.'*

Tom dropped his hand, watching Harry in that bright, maddening way. He was all pupils and white teeth, and fingers at the collar of Harry's robes, resting against the hollow of his throat.

Harry's pulse jumped and he hoped that Tom didn't notice.

'You're ridiculous,' he murmured, yet Tom's face didn't flicker, 'you get off on your own genius. God, you're so *arrogant.'*

'Hmm,' Tom said, ghosting a finger over Harry's pulse, content to stand there and try to make Harry squirm. 'You like me anyway.'

'I think "like" is a strong word. *Endure,* perhaps.'

'*Endure*, of course. Because you're so *unwilling.*'

'I will be if we stand in this corridor any longer. I didn't think rounds actually meant *rounds.'*

Tom grinned and then he was stepping back, tugging Harry forward and opening a classroom with a flick of his wand.

The door closed with a definite slam and shining his wand around, Harry lit up the empty desks and chairs. 'This is such exploitation of your Head Boy privileges,' he said. The moonlight made everything silver.

'It's your fault,' Tom said, 'you love risks.'

'Me? You're the biggest thrill-seeker I've ever met.'

Tom's fingers closed around Harry's wrist as he yanked him forward, closing the distance between them. Harry's breath hitched at the press of Tom's body against his own.

'I knew you secretly liked it,' Tom said, ghosting a finger across Harry's lip. 'You like to pretend —'

Harry cut him off with a growl, pulling Tom forward by the collar of his robe and effectively shutting him up. Tom's fingers latched into his hair and he shoved them backwards, all the while insistently kissing back.

Harry's legs hit a desk and they broke apart, breathing heavily. 'Let's —' he began and groaned as Tom palmed him through his robes.

'You like this, don't you?' His mouth was somewhere near Harry's ear, and the words made him shiver. 'You think you're so good and moral but really you're not. You like nothing better than being here with me getting you off.'

'You are so insufferable,' Harry said, arching into his touch, pressing forward.

Tom's lips ghosted over the shell of Harry's ear as he stroked him slow and easy. Harry could almost feel Tom's smugness, his gloating, unflappable desire to always be in control —

'Can you *not* bite me,' Harry gasped, as Tom tilted his chin, warm lips brushing over his jaw. 'You know I have to conceal that like *every day* —'

Tom snorted, nipping at Harry's neck anyway and then lazily lapping the mark with his tongue.

'A real hassle for you, I'm sure.'

Head spinning, biting his lip to prevent making any further noise, Harry tugged Tom closer and flipped their position. He was always so *smug*, he thought, so *assured,* so *controlled.*

'Shut up,' Harry said, 'why is everything an elaborate *game?'*

'I wouldn't quite call it a *game.'* His voice was still so level, his lips curling upwards, head tilted slightly back. 'I just want to *ruin* you.'

'Exactly,' Harry said, 'that's what you get off on, the whole act of

being in control.' He pressed a hand against Tom's robe, felt him, already hard, heard his breathing still. 'You think you're always so *composed.'*

Slowly, while still locking eyes with him, Harry unbuttoned the bottom of Tom's robe. Tom jerked ever so slightly as Harry took him in his hand. And oh, how Harry wanted to see him *squirm.*

'I am,' Tom said, raising his eyebrows. He looked intrigued, eager, and still so assured.

Harry stroked him firmly and Tom's breathing hitched. His knuckles were white as he gripped the desk behind, eyes half-lidded as he watched Harry steadily. Harry felt the slight movement of Tom's hips as he leaned into his hand, saw his jaw tighten as Harry *twisted.*

Roughly stroking his cock, Harry watched Tom's face and the way his hair was falling into his eyes. Tom's breathing was harsher now, loud in the quiet of the room. After several moments, his hips jerked upwards. *'Harry,'* he said, low and ragged. It was almost a *groan.* 'Harry, you — '

Harry released his cock and Tom gasped.

They stared at each other for a moment and Harry bit back a smirk. 'What, Tom?' he murmured, 'frustrated?'

'You can't just *stop.'*

*'*Oh? Funny, I thought you liked that. The whole *build-up,* isn't that your thing?*'* Harry thumbed the head of Tom's straining cock, watching his eyes darken. 'Oh right, you like doing it to *me.'*

Harry dropped to his knees and this time Tom really did stop breathing. Whatever retort he started died on his lips.

'You *wouldn't,*' he said quietly.

'Wouldn't I?'

Tom's hips twitched as Harry's breath fanned over his cock. Licking his lips quickly, Harry leaned forward. Would he *really,* just to get a rise out of Tom? Fingers threaded through his hair and there was a light pressure on his scalp.

'Don't,' Harry said, gazing up at him. 'Or I will never touch your dick

again.'

Tom let out a quiet huff of laughter, loosening his grip on Harry's hair. 'I love how that's your best threat.'

'Fine, I'll curse you. Is that better?' Wrapping a hand around his cock, Harry experimentally took the tip into his mouth.

Inhaling sharply, Tom's knuckles went white around the wood. 'I think you have to actually *do* something with your mouth,' he said, though the remark was ruined by the desperate edge to his voice.

'Patience,' Harry taunted, pulling off to swirl his tongue around instead.

'*Harry.'*

'Want to beg?' Harry said slyly. 'Because I could wait here all night.'

'I'm not going to *beg* — '

Tom scoffed, trailing off with a hitched gasp as Harry took him properly into his mouth.

Knowing he wasn't going to, Harry had caught him off guard and was rewarded with that stutter of shock — something between a groan and a whine — as Tom's composure finally cracked.

Harry smirked as Tom attempted to school his face. Meeting his eyes, he watched every shift of Tom's expression, every twitch of his hips, every low noise in his throat, and found a rhythm. It was almost *easy* when Tom jerked like that, responding to every slight change Harry tried out. He practically *squirmed.*

Fingers were back in his hair and this time Harry ignored them. Tom, he could tell, was resisting the urge to thrust against his face. His grip would tighten and then loosen, his hips starting to jerk. Harry pinned them against the desk, taking him deeper into his mouth.

'Fuck,' Tom breathed, eyes half-closed, fingers yanking Harry's hair so hard it hurt. 'You're so good, *god.'*

Harry's hand went to the base of his shaft, stroking in time with his mouth. Tom's control had finally slipped. He was a babble of praise and pants, eyes half-closed, tugging at Harry's hair. Tom trembled and Harry watched, fascinated, as his eyes screwed up and he yanked

Harry forward so hard he gagged.

Harry tried to glare but the next moment Tom was coming, letting out a low moan, his entire body shuddering. His face screwed up and for once his expression was completely unrestrained. Spilling into Harry's mouth, he gave a final shudder.

After a second, Harry pulled away. He scrunched his nose at the taste, spat the cum on the floor, wiped his mouth and leaned back.

Tom was flushed and his eyes were half-lidded. His hair was falling over his eyes, sweaty and beginning to curl, his gaze unfocused. Harry stood just as Tom's eyes snapped towards him. His cheeks heated at the sudden awareness there, the *knowledge* hanging between them.

'Did you really spit my cum on the floor?' Tom's voice was a little raspy and somehow, he managed to sound *offended.*

Harry snorted and it escalated into a laugh. His jaw hurt. Had he actually done that? He had only meant to rile Tom up a bit, shatter his composure and watch him come undone. *Not* –

'I forgot about your great lordship,' Harry said, rolling his eyes, 'forgive me.'

'Maybe this one time. After all, you did suck my dick.'

'Exactly.' His voice cracked a bit and Tom made a pleased noise as he adjusted his robes. He pulled Harry forward, grinning against his mouth.

'You're such an idiot,' Harry murmured, and Tom kissed him, very slowly, cupping Harry's face with one hand. The other wandered lower.

Somehow — against his better judgement — Harry was still hard. He slumped slightly as Tom wrapped his hand around him, thumbing over his slit.

Biting back a whine, Harry gripped Tom's shoulder. Everything fell away except the sensation, the slow-build of pressure, that wonderful rhythm of Tom's hand. His eyes fluttered even as he tried to keep the open, as Tom twisted over his head, revelling in the way Harry jerked.

Breathing in the warm skin of Tom's neck, Harry refused to look at

him and let Tom scrutinise his every reaction. Not when his eyes were so knowing and goading, his gaze that intense –

Harry gave a hitched gasp, fisting the material of Tom's robe. There was nothing but pressure, quicker now, building, and he was moaning, biting down hard on his bottom lip, his muscles going slack –

Shuddering, Harry came, panting into Tom's neck. For a second he didn't move and stayed there, eyes closed, waiting for his heart-rate to even out. Tom gave his cock another stroke and Harry jerked, overly sensitive, spilling further into his hand.

Pulling back, Harry glared at him and pushed his sweaty hair from his face. Tom was still smirking stupidly but right then Harry didn't think of the gloating that would surely follow. He tucked himself back into his robes, vanishing the mess between them.

He couldn't look at Tom, not without his heart giving another spike and his chest constricting. 'At least we didn't get caught by a ghost?' he said, clearing his throat.

There was a beat of silence.

'Yeah,' Tom said, a second too late, a touch too casual. 'That would have been . . . interesting.'

'Funny, *interesting* isn't what popped into my head. Awful, maybe, absolutely traumatising –'

Tom snorted, reaching forward to brush back a piece of Harry's hair.

Harry froze in place, breath catching. 'We should probably go back to the common room,' he said.

'Yeah,' Tom agreed and didn't move. Hand still lingering on Harry's face, he traced a finger across his scar.

Harry shivered at the sudden coolness and the sight of Tom's face so near his own. He felt the heat of Tom's open mouth, the way he slowly brushed his lips against Harry's, lazier now, easy. Harry breathed out raggedly through his nose, hesitated, rooted to the spot. A second passed, another, and leaning forward, Harry kissed him back.

Shattered Vision

Chapter Notes

> This chapter warrants an angst warning, in my opinion. Things get very heavy so uh -- beware?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry was half-asleep as he padded to the bathroom, hair rumpled, feet bare against the cold stone tiles. Pulling open the door, he came face to face with Abraxas, who was leaning over the porcelain sink, toothbrush halfway to his mouth.

‘Hello,’ Harry said, and Abraxas spat out a mouthful of toothpaste, giving him a surprised look.

“Harry,’ he exclaimed, voice rising far higher than could be deemed casual. ‘Nice weather, isn’t it?’

‘Lovely,’ Harry said, ‘the sun looks beautiful from underneath the lake.’

Red patches appeared high on Abraxas’ cheekbones and as he moved away from the sink, he laughed. He was wearing silk pyjamas, with his initials stitched in gold on the front pocket. ‘You —’ he said, patting his hands hastily on a towel. ‘Anyway, see you later.’

Just as Abraxas moved to the door — still blocked from where Harry stood on the threshold — he chewed his lip and paused.

‘You okay there, Abraxas?’ Harry said, raising his eyebrows in amusement.

‘Perfect, great, um —do you want to play Quidditch later?’

‘Well, we do have practice today.’

Another startled laugh. His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat and he wrung his hands together, shuffling from foot to foot.

Harry waited a moment, frowning. ‘What is it?’ he said. ‘You’re acting really odd.’

‘Odd? Really?’

‘Very.’

For another moment, Abraxas shuffled about, barely looking at him. Harry was about to give up just as he spoke.

‘Are you having *sex* with Tom?’

Whatever he expected wasn’t that. He felt his face heat up and they maintained a moment of eye-contact before glancing away at the same time.

‘Er —’ Harry began, feeling heat creep across his cheeks, ‘am I — why would you think that?’

Abraxas hadn't turned the tap off right and the faint trickle of water filled the room.

‘No reason,’ Abraxas said, ‘just all the flirting, and the bed hopping and the fact that it’s, well, pretty obvious.’

‘Oh,’ Harry said. All the tiredness drained out of him as they stood there, and he ran a hand through his hair. ‘Yeah,’ he said slowly, heart jumping in his throat, ‘we’re not in a relationship or anything though. I don’t even like him that much.’

‘Of course,’ Abraxas said, ‘I mean, Tom in a relationship —’ he shook his head. ‘That would be the day we all went and snapped our wands.’

‘Obviously,’ Harry said, voice a bit unsteady.

Abraxas looked stupid in his silk pyjamas, stupid as he fidgeted with the shirt sleeves, a blob of toothpaste on his chin, but looking at him, Harry couldn’t breathe.

‘Don’t tell anyone,’ he said, ‘it’s a bit — well, it’s *Tom.*’

Abraxas made a noise of agreement, clearing his throat. Harry watched him, no longer hot and bothered but insides growing cold.

‘I think it makes sense,’ Abraxas said, ‘you two are always . . . It fits. I’m not surprised.’

Harry gave him a careful look. ‘I can’t imagine you surprised then.’

‘No, I —’ he smiled. ‘Prat.’

Harry rubbed the back of his neck. ‘It doesn’t mean anything,’ he said.

‘Of course not.’

There was silence again — a silence so cold and tight that Harry inwardly braced, prepared himself for the inevitable.

‘I’m not judging you,’ Abraxas said, his face earnest despite its flush. ‘I don’t really care.’

‘I — ‘Harry swallowed the lump in his throat. ‘Okay.’

He busied himself with finding his toothbrush. Abraxas was watching him from the corner of his eye — not in contempt but something close to concern.

Turning off the faucet, Harry traced his finger over the snake design on the cold metal. He hadn’t had someone not judging him in a long time.

‘Abraxas?’ he said.

‘Yes?’

‘Nice weather, isn’t it?’

Abraxas laughed, shoulders slumping and Harry gave him a grin. He felt the tension drain from his body, almost dizzy with the sudden lightness that overtook it.

‘You’re honestly a massive git. You caught me off guard —’

‘You’re ridiculously awkward.’

‘I was *surprised.’*

Harry was so relieved that he listened to the rest of Abraxas’ babble as he got ready. He heard someone start to stir in the dorm, footsteps shuffling around, a trunk being opened and slowly, incredulously, he began to smile.

In potions that day, Professor Slughorn announced a Slug Club meeting. Between the clouds of curling lilac steam and the sound of bubbling cauldrons, he made his way to Harry and Tom's table — looked Harry very meaningfully in the eye — and said it was scheduled to not overlap with Quidditch practice. After giving Harry a wink and Tom a fond grin, he waddled off, manoeuvring between the tables.

'Bet you love that,' Tom said, when Slughorn was seated behind his desk, feet propped on the polished maple surface. 'What will the excuse be this time? Dragon Pox?'

'What am I, seventy? I'll conveniently break an arm or something. Or maybe I'll actually come this time to see the look on his face.'

'He turns a particularly horrid shade of purple when he's overjoyed.'

'Sounds wonderful.'

Tom hummed. 'And, of course, all your favourite Slytherins will be there. You know, the ones with ambition.'

'Is that what we're calling it now?'

'Slughorn will ask you dozens of questions as he gets drunker and drunker, see that you're clearly not interested in Quidditch, at least in terms of a career —'

Harry gave him a nasty look but Tom continued. '—and then he'll pry into your background, you'll milk the orphan story —'

'I don't *milk the orphan story,* that's you.'

'He will realise you're a poor half-blood with potential and then he will speculate on your family tree, latching onto the first member with any sort of respect, I'd imagine. Your father?'

'Well, he is a Potter,' Harry said quietly. He didn't want Slughorn to overhear, especially with the way Tom was talking. The conversation made him wary. 'The whole tree thing, is that what he did to you?'

Tom stiffened and Harry hadn't realised the lack of space between them until he leaned away.

'Of course not,' he said, 'all the professors know Tom Riddle's pathetic sob story. Dumbledore informed them of it immediately, I imagine,

pleased with himself for rescuing another little orphan. Quite the man, isn't he, Dumbledore?'

He said the name with such distaste that Harry bit back a response. There was no need to test Tom when he was like this, when the questions could send them down a path he didn't want to venture.

He could put it together anyway with the jigsaw pieces of Tom's childhood engraved in his mind.

A dangerous boy with an affinity for magic, no background to speak of, a thirst to prove himself, to carve out a path . . .

'Well, you've turned me off the Slug Club entirely,' Harry said, 'so thanks.'

Tom leaned forward, eyebrows furrowed in concentration, and added lacewing flies to his cauldron. When he turned around, his face was blank.

'Why, you don't want your background prodded at? Surely, you won't let everyone down like that. I'm sure you could *refuse* Slughorn's questioning.'

'I don't know my family history anyway,' Harry said.

The Dursleys.

'He wouldn't be very interested.'

Tom's face twitched, ever so slightly. 'Of course, Harry.'

'They're dead,' Harry said coldly, 'long before I could meet any relatives.'

'Pity, I suppose. Marrying your mother —mudblood, wasn't she? — must have been quite the scandal.'

Harry turned back to his potion, spending a long moment reading the instructions on the board. Tom was trying to catch him out —trying to tease him into a trap, toy with him until he gave something away.

'What about your mother then, Tom? Was she a witch? Or was that a scandal too?'

Tom's knuckles, clenched around his chopping knife, went white. His voice was remarkably still as he glanced up. 'Something like that,' he

said.

And just like that, Harry felt on guard. That feeling —that instinct— he had all his life came back, swirling uneasily in his mind. He would watch Tom because he knew what he was like, because there was something under the surface, dying to escape.

He had to be careful.

Harry was good at watching Tom. It was ingrained into him, second-nature, an instinct he always had, something that prevented him from looking away, no matter how much he wanted to. He could never really ignore Tom — he was always there, floating in his thoughts, unsettling and fascinating, in the corner of his mind.

Was the whole thing an act? Everything he did, everything practiced and learned, suppressing the monster underneath?

You and I, Harry, in the end.

The knowing looks and the strange, pensive manner he had adopted lately. The goading remarks, the *satisfaction.*

'You've been staring at that piece of parchment for the past three minutes,' Tom said.

They didn't mention the disagreement and neither of them had apologised. It faded, meaningless, with no more mentions of backgrounds or mothers. But Harry was restless — his skin too hot, too itchy, his mind abuzz. The remnants of it lingered — a certain tension creeping in. Harry was sick of Tom's veiled remarks, the way he poked and prodded looking for any slight crack in Harry's resolve.

'You've been staring at me for three minutes then,' he said.

Tom smiled. 'True.' He leaned back in his chair, disregarding the book he was reading.

'Why?' Harry sat up straighter, putting down his quill. His mouth tasted bitter and he couldn't look at Tom without feeling a wash of unease and something more intense, more painful.

'Why what? Am I *looking* at you?'

'Why do you even like me? Why are we doing this? You don't want to spend your time around people, you always say it.'

Harry met his gaze steadily but Tom — instead of frowning or scoffing or asking Harry had he eaten anything funny — laughed. 'You're interesting. You interest *me.'*

He said the words so easily, let them roll off his tongue as though that was all that mattered, as if it was enough. For Tom, maybe it was.

'You want to figure me out then,' Harry said. 'And this connection.'

'You know that.'

'I know you're hiding something.'

His eyes expanded a fraction. Harry didn't think he would have noticed before — not if he didn't know Tom's face so well, all his expressions, had the image burned into his memory. If he didn't *watch* him just as intensely as Tom did back.

'Involving you?' Tom said.

Harry nodded. The Common Room was quiet and, in the stillness, he saw Tom’s fingers close his book, rest spider-like on the black spine.

'Let’s see, a plan to murder you in your sleep? Or frame your friends, perhaps? Do you still *really* think I care about that?’ He shook his head and all of it came so effortlessly, so smooth, and Harry didn’t know, didn’t want to believe –

‘I don't want to kill you anymore, Harry. Why bother? I already have you.’

'Well, I'm not a possession. You can't own me, like a bloody book —'

A diary.

‘Or a —’

Ring.

'—I’m not your pet!'

Tom's eyebrows raised. 'I don't want a pet.’

'Yes, well —'

Frame your friends, perhaps.

Harry breathed inwards as he looked at Tom, at his dark, glossy hair and handsome eyes, the slight tilt of his head, the teasing curve of his lips. ‘What did you really do when you met Ron and Hermione?'

'I threatened to kill them. Honestly, Harry, what do you think?'

'I know it was something,' Harry said, 'you always have a reason. I *know*, Tom.'

'And how can you be so sure that I didn't just want to see if they were anything like you? I was curious.'

'Because you would have done it earlier. We've been at Hogwarts months, and you get interested now? You're not interested in Ron and Hermione and you never have been. You met them for another reason and I told you to stay away.'

It must have been something in his face, maybe the coldness of his voice, the conviction, that made Tom look around.

'Let's go to the dormitory,' he said abruptly.

‘Why, you don’t want to cause a scene in front of your precious Death Eaters?’

‘You really want them to hear this conversation? About your friends and *evil Tom Riddle?'*

Harry clenched his jaw. 'Fine then, let's go.'

He rose from his seat, stalked up the steps, and didn’t turn around until he heard the dormitory door close. It was very quiet now, and the room was dim, the sky darkening through the long, slanted windows.

‘Why did you meet them?’ Harry said again.

‘To see if the stories matched up,' Tom said. His voice was toneless as he strode across the floor, footsteps echoing on the polished wood. 'All the lies, so *many* of them — how do you keep track?'

'They wouldn't tell you anything,' Harry said, 'they’d rather be tortured.'

'That's a curious statement to make. Very personal, isn't it? For two people who have never met me before, to possess such hatred.'

'They know what you've done to Hagrid, I've told them everything —'

Tom laughed, a sharp hollow sound that bounced around the room. 'This was never about Hagrid,' he said, 'It's about us, Harry, the entire time.'

'I didn't even *know* you. That's stupid, it's —'

Harry's eyes widened and his mind became perfectly clear. 'Ron and Hermione would never give you information,' he said, 'but you have other means of getting it, don't you? You couldn't stand not knowing my secrets — you're obsessive —'

'You've been lying to me since day one, forgive me for wanting to know why.'

'You read their minds. You knew you couldn't do it to me because I'd feel it and block you out, but they haven't experienced legilimency before. So, you met with them and you — found out *what*, Tom?'

He smiled thinly. 'I found out a lot of things, Harry. Did you know Hermione Granger is very worried about your mental state?'

'Fuck my *mental state.* You read their minds, the two people I told you were off-limits.'

'And I told you I don't have limits. I wanted the truth and they were convenient.'

It would be worse if Tom had cursed him. If he tried to kill him again. Anything would be better than the sincerity, the lack of remorse — lack of anything.

'What did you find then?" Harry said, his voice steady, anger reducing everything to a painful stillness.

'Your secrets are safe with me.'

It was that smile that did it. With its goading edge, lack of concern, the barest, most unveiled *smirk.* Harry crossed the floor, found Tom's chest and shoved.

Tom staggered backwards but caught his footing quickly. 'You're so mistrustful,' he said, with a wild, sharp laugh, 'don't you trust me?'

The smile still hovered over his mouth, amusement shining in his eyes.

'Do you really think I'll ever trust you?' Harry laughed, a numb, disbelieving sound. 'Look at you. I will never trust you, Tom, not even for a second.'

Tom's face darkened and something flared in his eyes — a rush of anger, sudden and cruel in the dim light.

'I'll never trust you either,' he said softly. 'After everything, your allegiance is still to Dumbledore. You're a time-bomb, Harry, and one day you're going to crack — you're going to feel just a little too guilty — and drag me down with you.'

'Dumbledore already knows who you are. Whatever grand delusion you have that you can fool everyone with your stupid act is wrong. He knows what you're like, right from the moment he met you.'

'In the orphanage?' His lips curled at the flash of surprise on Harry's face. 'No, he suspected. He didn't *know* anything until you told him.'

'And what exactly did I tell him? That you framed Hagrid? If I *told* Dumbledore you'd be on your way to Azkaban.'

'About Hagrid,' Tom agreed. He touched Harry's jaw with one cold, pale finger. 'About the Chamber of Secrets.' The touch was light, barely a brush, lingering on his chin. They were staring at each other, face to face, and Tom didn't blink, didn't do anything but grin in that sharp, twisted way. 'About Voldemort and every little act from the future.'

There was a second where Harry didn't move — where it was just that stretched smile, those unfathomable eyes, black in the light, and the feeling of the air expelling from his lungs, his stomach plunging, everything knocking out of him with a whoosh.

Blindly, Harry shoved Tom away, so hard that he smashed into the nearest bed, the frame making a loud crack in the silence that settled.

Several numb, timeless seconds. Harry wasn't breathing — he was being squeezed from all sides; he was back in the graveyard, knowing this was the end, and there was nothing else, nothing coming after it.

'How would I know what happens in the future?'

‘You’re a lovely liar,’ Tom said, ‘but is it really necessary now?’

‘I don’t know what you’re on about. *What —‘*

‘But you do, you know so many things, Harry, even more than I suspected. Do you know what it’s like, a revelation like that?’

‘A revelation like *what*?’ Harry didn’t recognise his voice, didn’t recognise anything much — the room, with its dark wood swimming around him, the sound of Tom’s voice, the burning in his chest. ‘You’re mental. You’re obsessive. Whatever you think, whatever *crazy idea you have —’*

‘Will you clear it up then?’ Tom said. ‘You see, the thing about reading your friends’ minds is that I had to be careful. They’re angry, Weasley and Granger, and they don’t like me very much, though heaven knows why. But still, the minute I performed legilimency it was already too late.’

Harry’s heart stopped and started beating in the span of several seconds. ‘So you think,’ he said, as calmly as he could, ‘that because you saw something in Ron and Hermione’s minds, it’s true? You think we’re from the future? Do you know how insane that is? I mean, I know you’re so fixated on this idea that I’m hiding something but really, how would that even work? People *imagine* things, you know. Just because they thought something doesn’t mean it’s real.’

He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t move, he could barely think before the words formed.

‘Weasley and Granger must have very vivid imaginations then.’ Tom stepped into Harry’s space, who took a step backwards. He couldn’t look at Tom right now, be that near him. He wasn’t sure what he would do.

‘Yes, well, trauma from Grindelwald made them paranoid. And let’s face it, they don’t like you. Who knows what they were imagining when you decided to come over.’

‘Yes,’ Tom said, ‘but I *do* know. Imagine my surprise when they were thinking of Voldemort — a name only my closest know of — and a completely new world where they actively hunted me. A world where I *ruled* and you three were on a desperate mission to kill me.’

Harry was unable to open his mouth. He wanted to scream, to shout, to make Tom shut up right there and then, but there was only a

numbness, a tingling overtaking his whole body. It was as though he wasn't there but observing: watching, adrift, at something too horrible to comprehend.

'I saw you. The Chosen One. The boy who brought it upon himself to kill the most powerful Dark Lord in the world.'

Harry's eyes were glassy — he stared down at the shiny floor, ears buzzing, Tom's voice floating faraway.

'That's ridiculous,' he said, and the world lurched so suddenly that he almost tripped. 'You think we're from the future where we *hunted* you? This supposed Dark Lord? And I'm the Chosen One — what does that even mean*?'*

Harry laughed, a detached, funny sound and Tom's eyes flashed, bleeding a vivid red in the light.

'Don't lie to me. I know you're from the future, Harry. You were planning to kill me — piece by piece.' He twisted the Gaunt Ring on his finger and when Harry's eyes flickered to it, he smiled.

'You didn't mean to get stuck back here, did you? Not when the future needed their hero. How did it happen?'

'It didn't. Have you heard yourself, how crazy you sound?'

The tightness in his chest was growing, building steadily into a burn that became unbearable. Spots spun before his eyes, everything blurring together, merging into something surreal, impossible —

And Tom's eyes were red and alight, face lit up in triumph.

'We both know it's true, Harry. I've known for *ages.*'

His ears rang louder than Tom's words did but still they registered, knocking the air from Harry more effectively than any curse could.

'I don't want to kill you,' Tom said, 'don't you see? I already have what I want.'

'No, you don't,' Harry said, blinking slowly until his vision cleared, 'because I'll never be on your side. You won't *have* me, Tom, you'll never truly have what you want. You won't be satisfied no matter how much you want it.'

'Then maybe I will kill you.' He said it so tonelessly that Harry was

jolted to the present immediately. ‘You hated me, after all.’

‘I do hate you.’

‘No, you don’t. But you want to. You want it so badly you’re being torn in two.’

‘Funny, I’m not feeling very torn right now.’

A ghost of a smirk crossed Tom’s face. ‘Were you going to kill me, Harry? When you first arrived?’

‘I should have.’

‘You couldn’t though.’ He looked like he was resisting the urge to reach out and touch Harry again. ‘Not without destroying the future.’

‘*Saving* the future.’

‘No,’ he said softly. ‘You wouldn’t kill me and become a murderer. You’re too *good*. You can’t.’

Harry’s fingers found his wand, the wood cool under his touch. ‘You shouldn’t count on what I can and can’t do right now.’

Tom’s eyes sparked. ‘What I don’t understand,’ he said, ‘is why I went after you in the first place. A *child*. How did you survive?’

‘Not a clue,’ Harry said, ‘I guess I’ve just always been better than you, even as Voldemort. How does that feel?’

Tom’s face darkened. ‘I’m unstoppable,’ he said, ‘that’s what I’ve seen.’

Harry laughed. ‘That’s your impression from Ron and Hermione’s memories. But they’re afraid. They’ve never even seen Voldemort before.’

‘Are you going to show me yours then?’

‘So you can see every time you fuck up and change it?’

They both stilled. Tom was less than a metre away — hands by his sides, wand dangling loosely between his fingers, eyes flecked red. There was no noise except their steady breathing and the buzzing in Harry’s ears.

‘Fortunately, I know enough information already,’ Tom said.

‘Then you know you don’t win. That you’ll *never* win.’

‘Never?’ His expression was just cruel enough for it to hurt. ‘What about now?’

Adrenaline had made his head fuzzy and Harry took a step away.

‘I branded you when you were a baby,’ Tom said.

‘You never did anything. That’s the future. We’re not fated, or connected, or anything like that. My scar? A killing curse in *fifty years* made that scar.’

‘I am him,’ Tom said, ‘I’m Voldemort but *better.’*

‘You’re seventeen.’

‘So are you. Or is that another lie?’

‘No,’ Harry said, ‘it’s the truth. You think you know everything but you don’t. You’re so scared of dying that all your plans fail. You’re so *terrified* of Albus Dumbledore, who can beat you, even at your best —’

‘How dare you.’ He flicked his wand lazily and Harry’s knees buckled. The pain was almost a relief — all-consuming in its intensity, taking over his mind, blocking everything else out.

‘Dumbledore is *nothing*. What I see, Harry, is everything I want coming true. Who cares about humanity? I’m unstoppable.’

‘Voldemort is a dangerous fool,’ Harry said, breathing through the pain, so intense he could taste blood in his mouth, sharp and metallic. ‘But you’re just arrogant. So how about you don’t take credit for all those *pathetic things you never did — ‘*

The pain disappeared and a beam of light came straight at him. Harry was ready. His shield rippled to life. He fired on reflex.

‘*Obliviate!’*

The jet of light was brilliant and white and burning and Tom swatted it away, letting it explode against one of the bedside tables.

Harry cast against; Tom stepped smartly out of its path.

'You think that's going to work?' he said. 'You can't obliviate me. Not with my Occlumency and that *pathetic attempt* —'

He twitched his wand and a spiralling electric blue flooded from it. Harry sent it bouncing backwards, fizzling through the air and exploding between them.

Harry wet his lips. Felt Tom's eyes on him as though they burned.

'You can't make me *un*know, Harry. No matter how much you want to.'

'There's this thing called Azkaban — a Dementor's Kiss might make you forget a couple of things.'

'This was your biggest fear wasn't it?' Tom said, 'me finding out everything.'

In response, Harry cast another spell and this time it struck.

His body felt hot, his mind on fire. Spells were bouncing against the furniture which in turn became animals — a lamp morphed into a snake, a trunk a pack of snarling dogs, a shoe a flock of bright, pecking birds. Harry wasn't aware of the blood trickling into his eyes, only the pulse thumping in his ears, the sizzling colour of the air.

'You may know about the future,' Harry said, weaving out of the path of a curse, 'but I know everything about you.'

The picture-frame behind Harry's head shattered and Tom paused. He had a long, crimson gash down his cheek and his robes were singed from where Harry had set them on fire.

'I know about your mother. Merope Gaunt, right? She fed your father a love potion and died giving birth to you. You grew up in Wool's Orphanage with all those muggles you hate so much.'

Tom's eyes widened and his wand dipped for a moment.

'I know you killed your family. You framed your uncle Morfin and used their deaths to make a horcrux. It must have been such a disappointment, meeting them — how long were you waiting for it? I *know,* Tom, all the twisted little aspects of your life. And you want to know a secret? You always fail.'

The expression on Tom's face filled Harry with relish. He wanted him

to hurt, wanted him to bleed, to feel like he made Harry do.

'I'm not going to fail,' Tom said, 'not like you are. The minute I found out the truth, your future was destroyed. Mine is just beginning.'

'You're going to be defeated.'

'I'm not. And you're never going back. The Weasley family, you loved them, didn't you? Ginny Weasley — ' He smiled. 'I'll ensure she's never born.'

Something snapped.

Harry was hurling curses before he could think, streams of acid green and scarlet red whizzing through the air. It was physical, the burn of his chest, stronger and more intense than anything before.

Tom dodged a jet of light that narrowly missed his head. Sent a curse back at Harry, twisting and spinning and pulsing with heat. A table exploded in a shower of splinters. Tom weaved out of the way, hit Harry with something that sliced neatly through his cheek.

He couldn't feel it anymore, not with the rush of his mind, the spike of adrenaline coursing through his veins. There was only magic, and instinct, and blood pounding in his head, lights flashing before his eyes.

He cast a spell, and then another. Aimed astray and hit a bedpost, watched Tom's eyes flicker to it for a split-second. The next beam of light hit him directly on the shoulder and Tom blasted into the wall behind him.

There was a moment, a heartbeat, a brief lull, where Harry's instincts screamed at him to do something – a voice saying *act now, think later, you have him, do it.* Hatred overwhelmed him, the desire to see Tom defeated, dead, it was the only way out of this, what he had to do –

The split-second ended and Harry threw up a shield. Tom's next spell exploded in a shower of golden sparks, momentarily blinding, and when it cleared, they stared at each other, chests heaving.

There was blood staining the shoulder of Tom's tattered robes, and his eyes – locked on Harry's – were alight in surprise. He was caught off guard, *stunned* as reality crept back. And lurking there, beneath the shock, beneath the glimmer of curiously, that faint, lingering question –

Could you? Could you really?

Smoke rose from a section of the wood, near one of the shattered four-posters. Abraxas' sock was peeking out from the remains of the bed – dark green, dirty, scrunched into a careless ball. Harry stared at it dimly, focusing on that instead of the carnage around them.

He raised his eyes to Tom who was still watching him oddly. Surprise was foreign on his face and twisted it into something unfamiliar. Though blood was streaming steadily from his nose, Tom didn't seem aware of anything but Harry.

They looked at each other and it all came rushing back.

He knew. He knew. All of it. And the future . . .

Everything around him was a *lie.*

'Harry,' Tom began. He stepped forward. Harry stepped back.

His heart was hammering viciously, so much that it *hurt,* a spike that made him almost gasp aloud, stumble –

Harry looked at the crack in the floor, listened to the dim ring of his ears. 'Don't,' he said, voice flat and dull and unfamiliar. 'Just . . . don't.'

He left the dorm.

For a long time, he walked. With no destination in mind, the dungeons became a labyrinth, vast and never-ending. Over and over he could walk down the same corridor, pass the same smooth stone walls and gilded portraits, and not even realise it.

Numbness had overridden everything. Harry couldn't feel the hot throb of his face, the bruises that were surely blossoming. His glasses were smashed but that didn't matter either. It only made the vision more interesting, broken and distorted, jagged lines cutting through the expense of corridors.

Thoughts, too, passed through his mind fleetingly.
Who *cared* anymore, what happened next? It was all over.

Harry walked into one of the classrooms, feeling nothing. Nothing as the lights flickered to life, as the empty desks and dirty sinks stared back at him. Nothing as the room spun around and around, and he watched it, seeing chairs floating near the ceiling.

Harry squeezed his eyes shut and when he opened them, the room no longer spun.

How are you going to tell Ron and Hermione that they'll never see their families again?

The room was tiny. Since when were potions classrooms so small? This one was out of use, with cobweb-lined sinks, grimy cauldrons, and desks covered in sheets of dust. The walls seemed to *squeeze* him, the rows of desks a maze, closing in at all sides.

Harry closed the door behind him and went down the same grey corridor, tracing the same steps. The dungeon was suffocating with its narrow walls, compressing from every angle. It was as if the air was being dragged from him, little by little, until his head was light, his feet faltering, and he couldn't breathe.

Harry gasped as he reached the ground floor, ducking into the nearest bathroom. For a moment he stared at his reflection in shock – blood, everywhere, a mess of crisscrossing gashes, a rip right through his robes, glass shards in his hair. The sight of it somehow calmed his breathing and he clutched the basin until his hands stopped shaking.

The glasses were easy to fix, as were the robes. One of the cuts – a nasty, jagged one, thin and bleeding steadily – wasn't. When everything else was healed, he splashed water on his face and pressed his head to the cool basin.

Harry wasn't aware of leaving until he was on the Seventh Floor. His feet guided him until he was standing beside the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, watching it unseeingly, a voice somewhere close behind.

'Harry? What are you doing up here?'

Harry turned slowly. 'Ron?'

It wasn't just Ron. Hermione was at his shoulder, her expression going from bemused to horrified. 'Harry – *what happened?'*

He looked at her panic-stricken face, Ron's worried eyes, and couldn't say it. 'Let's go in here,' he managed. 'The Room of Requirement . . .'

He paced back and forth before the wall. *I need a place to talk in private . . . I need a place to talk in private . . . I need a place to talk in private . . .*

The door materialised before them and they went through. It was simple, in a mocking imitation of a Common Room: the walls were draped green, and there were three large, lumpy armchairs taking up the centre. A fire crackled in the corner, its flames flickering from red to green and back again. Harry stared at it and a moment later it disappeared entirely.

'What happened, mate?' Ron whispered, ‘you look – '

'Awful,' Hermione said. 'You’re like a ghost. Here, let's sit down.'

He must have indeed looked awful because neither of them said anything. Hermione ushered him clumsily into an armchair and Ron restlessly drummed his fingers against the arm of another. Harry stared at the spot where the fire had resided.

'There's blood on your robes,' Hermione said suddenly. 'Were you in a fight?'

Harry looked up from the carpet and into her eyes. 'Yes.'

'Oh.' She blinked once, twice, throat working. ‘Do you want to talk about it?’

It was a minute before Harry got his mouth to move. 'Riddle found out about the time-travel,' he said. ‘We just fought about it.'

'You . . .’ Ron breathed inwards, features going slack. 'Okay,' he said shakily, ‘okay, tell us everything.'

Though Hermione’s eyes were big and startled, she didn’t say anything either. It was only this – the lack of questions, of protesting, the quiet agreement between them – that let him continue.

He told them everything that had happened in the dorm.

‘He knows we're from the future and we were hunting him and his horcruxes.’ Harry’s voice was hoarse. ‘He knows that I'm the Boy-Who-Lived and about how I defeated him as a baby.'

'*How?'* Hermione said.

Harry smiled grimly. 'He read your minds. That day you were talking

to him in the library.'

They gaped at him for a long moment.

'Fucking – 'Ron began, 'fucking *bastard*.'

'Just like that?' Hermione said. 'And we didn't know?'

'Tom can be . . . subtle.'

I've known for ages.

'I tried to deny it,' Harry said, 'I tried to obliviate him. I tried – 'He felt like he was pleading and maybe he was. 'I'll fix it. We'll obliviate him again. Maybe Dumbledore . . . we'll do something.'

'Even if we fixed the time-turner,' Hermione said, voice trembling 'we'd be in a completely different place! We probably wouldn't be born!'

Ron's face was ashen. He was staring down at a frayed part of the carpet, unblinkingly. 'My family,' he said, 'I'm never going to see them again.'

And then he looked up, and Harry noticed his eyes were wet.

'My family!' he roared. 'What the hell about them? What the *fuck?* They're just gone forever like they – they never fucking existed or something?'

Harry said nothing. His throat was burning. It took an effort to lift his head, to maintain eye contact.

'What about everything? What about our whole lives? *This* is it now, and everything else was just a dream?'

Hermione touched his arm and Ron shrugged her off.

'I'm sorry,' Harry said, voice cracking. 'I'm sorry I dragged you here with me.'

Ron said nothing. His shoulders were shaking and his head was bowed. Like a sharp punch to the stomach, Harry realised that he was crying.

He didn't know how long they sat there. He was staring at the carpet, the same way Ron had, and only blinking when his eyes started to

hurt. He looked up when he heard the sniffling.

Hermione was rubbing her reddened eyes, looking like she had been crying silently for quite some time. ‘It’s –’ she began shakily. ‘I don’t know what to do. It’s completely ruined.’

‘Hermione –’ Harry said. And it was watching them – Ron, trying to cry quietly, Hermione, with gasping, broken sobs – that shattered something inside him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I’ll fix it. I’ll kill him if I have to. I’ll *kill* Tom for you two. Please – *please* don’t cry –’

Harry knew, at that moment, that he would do anything for them, no matter what it cost him. It was worse than any cruciatus, worse than anything else in the world. He couldn’t see them like this, not after what he had caused, what he had done.

‘It’s not your fault, Harry,’ Hermione said. ‘If anything – we –’

‘No,’ he said, so harsh that they stopped. ‘No.’

They were silent after that and time blurred. Harry’s throat hurt so much that he could barely swallow. He wanted to cry – could feel it prickle behind his eyes – but couldn’t. He couldn’t do anything but stare until his eyes burned, drifting and detached, feeling the press of Hermione’s smaller hand in his own.

Thoughts rose unbidden: Ginny, with her bright grin and dimples, Remus and Tonks, with matching smiles. A slim hand stretched out to show the glint of a ring. Fleur, radiant in her wedding dress, Molly Weasley opening her arms to hug him, warm and familiar and *gone, gone, never again.*

Harry closed his eyes against it all and they flashed as a technicolour blur behind his lids. It was just the three of them now, just Ron, Hermione and him.

The future was gone.

Chapter End Notes

> I tried my best not to leave this one on a cliffhanger but it was a bit inevitable, I'm afraid.

Strained Encounters

His dreams were distorted. A feverish blur of colour, waves of scarlet swam before his eyes. The occasional flash of copper-red beckoned somewhere out of reach, and snatches of conversation drifted past — intense whispers, high pleading notes, a voice so soft and earnest and *sad.* He saw Sirius' gaunt profile, his matted strands of black hair, his hollow, desperate eyes; pale hands reaching towards him, up, up, up, through shrouds of darkness. The soft golden-brown eyes of Mrs Weasley and he was trapped, small, looking at a sliver of light under the door, voices low and murky and out of reach.

The flashes went from muddled to painfully clear. Jagged outlines would sharpen alarmingly, looming before him, wild-eyed and accusing. He even saw his mother – she shifted from Lily Potter to Mrs Weasleys, slim and then plump, soft and then hard, eyes vivid green, face as blurry and ever-changing as a Boggart.

One dream of Remus Lupin — wan face, scarred hands, old parchment, frayed robes— had him pressing his face into the pillow, trembling and gasping until the shivers died down. The face still swam in his mind, tender and wistful, his mild voice lingering. Harry clung to the outline until it slipped away and then sat up, his throat as raw as if he had been swallowing glass.

He shoved away the bed sheets tangled around his feet, grabbed his invisibility cloak and slipped out of the dormitory into the moonlit grounds. The harsh wind was jarring, so cold that it overrode everything else.

'I'm worried about you,' Abraxas said, a few days later—or was it a week? More? —in Charms. 'You never sleep.'

Harry pulled his eyes away from the foggy windowpane. It was raining again and the classroom was lit up by dozens of long, white candles that cast funny shadows.

'What do you mean I never sleep?'

Professor Flitwick was explaining the theory behind the Protean Charm, chalk squeaking as it glided across the blackboard.

'Because—' Abraxas' face was torn. 'Because I hear you get up and leave, and you're not there in the mornings anymore, not even when I

wake up and that's *early*. And you're not in the Common Room or the dungeons. You just disappear.'

Harry looked down at his notes. How could he explain that he walked around the cold, dark grounds? Or when that was futile, he was in the Room of Requirement, sitting at the empty kitchen table of the Burrow, watching the clock hands tick. That he could *smell* it—the heavy aroma of cooking, the wilting summer pansies, the humid air.

'Around,' he said vaguely. 'I wake up and I can't just lie there, not when my whole head feels *sick.'*

'Is it … is it about Tom?'

Abraxas' voice lowered. His eyes flickered across the room to where Tom sat, straight in his seat, eyes locked on Professor Flitwick.

"No,' Harry said, 'no, it's … it's not really.'

'I know you had a fight. *Everyone* knows, Harry, he's in an awful mood. Can't you just — move on?'

'And what, forgive him?' He snorted. 'It's alright, Abraxas, it's not about Tom. Well, he's part of it sure, but I guess I — I miss my family.'

The words surprised both of them.

'You,' Abraxas said, swallowing. 'You mean, after Grindelwald —'

'Yeah,' Harry said, 'they're all dead and I'll never see them again. I know, ridiculous, right? But I can't get it out of my head.'

Abraxas was deathly silent. Harry knew he didn't know what to say as he shuffled about, fidgeting with his quill.

'I'm sorry they're dead,' he said finally, 'that's really, really shit.'

Harry laughed. He had to laugh at Abraxas' grave face, his serious blue eyes. 'Yeah,' he agreed, 'that about sums it up.'

He found Ron and Hermione across the classroom. Ron was absently doodling something on his page and Hermione was staring at the blackboard, eyes not blinking.

'Do you want to talk about them? Did Tom—um—say anything?'

He must have caught something on Harry's face. 'I won't pester,' he

said hastily, ‘I don’t mean —’

‘I know,’ Harry said. ‘You’re a good friend, Abraxas.’

A surprised silence followed his words. ‘Well —I, um—thanks.’

Harry smiled at his flustered face. He wondered if Abraxas had ever been told that before and felt inexplicably sad.

‘I guess I need to process it a bit,’ he said, ‘but really, I’m fine. I’ll *be* fine.’

‘Okay,’ Abraxas said, ‘and what about you and —um, Tom?’

This time Harry shrugged. ‘Doesn’t matter. It’s over.’

Inspired by their conversation, Abraxas had taken to sticking very closely by Harry’s side, trying to distract him by pointing out portraits and babbling off their history.

‘. . . so that’s Artemisia Lufkin, the first female minister. Belinda used to be mental about her, she’s got a poster somewhere in her house …’

‘That one was painted in the seventeenth century. See how the movement’s sort of stiff and jerky and the eyes blink very slowly? They hadn’t mastered the process by then. Now see, *this* one . . .’

Harry took it in as best as he could, but soon his interest started to fade, and he felt like he was wandering through a stuffy art gallery, a guide breathing down his neck. The day trickled past, but when the bell signalled the end of lessons his attempts at solitude were futile.

‘Don’t you think Herbology’s nonsense this year? Though probably for you, it’s not. Weren’t you home-schooled in it? I’m surprised you aren’t overwhelmed.’

The chatter died as they reached the Great Hall. Harry’s stomach rolled at the thought of dinner, and more so, at sitting there, trying to avoid Tom’s searing gaze, in the strained atmosphere.

He spotted Ron’s bright red head — felt a mixture of relief and dread — and apologetically told Abraxas where he was going.

‘Do you want me to bring you something back, then?’

‘No, it’s fine — I’ll go to the kitchen later.’ He forced his face into a smile at Abraxas’ worried expression, waited until it eased a bit, and darted after Ron.

“Oh, Harry. Are you going to dinner?’

Harry shook his head and was surprised when Ron agreed. ‘Me neither. Everyone’s too damn cheerful, you know? And they want to make conversation, and ask what’s wrong — ‘his face tightened— ‘anyway, it’s a nightmare.’

There was a brief silence. ‘Mine’s the opposite,’ Harry said, ‘everything’s so tense, I think the Slytherins are afraid to breathe out loud in case Tom says something.’

‘*Riddle.’* Ron’s face darkened, darkened so much that Harry stilled. ‘Have you spoken to him since?’

Harry shook his head.

‘I want to *kill* him,’ Ron hissed, ‘fuck, I want to murder him, even though it wouldn’t make a damn difference.’

There was a flock of younger students heading into the hall, their bright laughter bouncing off the walls. Harry felt a flicker of pain in his head, a hint that Tom was annoyed.

‘I know,’ he said.

‘Just — just imagine it. Imagine him *dead.* Fuck, if only we could, if only —’

Harry had fantasised a lot about Tom dead — about him pleading and apologising, face bright with fear— but now he was only numb. It was a wild thought, a daydream, twisted and absurd and bringing a fleeting satisfaction.

‘Where’s Hermione?’ he said.

Ron rubbed the back of his neck. ‘We had a fight.’

‘You two? I thought you were attached at the hip by now.’

‘It was stupid anyway.’ His ears were turning pink. ‘She was acting like it was all okay and I just sort of —snapped at her? Then we

started arguing about the future, like we were both losing more than the other or some rubbish. And — 'he shook his head, 'then it turned into *Riddle*, and I said we should kill him, but she kept mentioning morals, and how it's wrong, as if any of that matters anymore. And she said *you'd* be devastated if it happened, but it would be doing you a favour — '

Harry's insides twisted at the thought, more intensely than he thought they would. 'I wouldn't be devastated,' he said.

'And of course, Dumbledore only said he'd keep an eye on him.'

Harry's head snapped up. 'What did Dumbledore say?'

Ron waved a hand. 'He's very sorry. Riddle's known for so long that there is no way to get the information out of his head now. The only thing to do is to keep an eye on him before he starts building his following outside of school. I don't know what I expected — he's not exactly going to *kill* a student, is he?'

'Maybe if it was for the greater good,' Harry said.

He smirked but Ron only rubbed his hands along his robe and said, 'you don't still think this is all your fault, do you? Because he got the information from me and Hermione's minds, not yours.'

'I know. I just — I feel awful about your family. I know it's not the same, but I think about them all the time and it makes me *sick* because it's not fair, not for *you* —'

'Yeah,' Ron agreed and he took a slight step back. His expression had shifted, screwed up as though he was about to cry. He cleared his throat. 'I can't talk about them, alright? I can't. Not to you, not to Hermione. She doesn't get it but — god, Harry, they're *gone* and I can't —'

'I know,' Harry said, 'I don't want to talk about them either. It's not alright and it's not — it's not all *normal.'*

'Yeah,' Ron said, and Harry pretended not to see him swipe at his eyes. 'Thanks.'

Being around Ron made him feel almost sick — everything stood out vividly, came back when he got a glimpse of Ron's face, a flash of that hair.

He didn't say anything though. They sat around in silence and eventually Hermione joined them —took a look at their faces—and sat down too.

'I'm sorry,' she said, even as Ron started to protest. 'I'm sorry for pushing, and being insistent and —'

'It's alright, Hermione,' Ron said, 'I'm sorry too.'

And then she sat down between them, so they were all squashed on the little bench, and Harry could smell the shampoo of her hair, feel it tickle his cheek. He saw them lace their hands together and when Hermione reached for his hand too, he squeezed back and watched as she relaxed.

'We're going to be okay,' he said, as reassuringly as he could. There was a lump in his throat — raw and painful — and he had that urge to get up and flee. It was too much, too acute, too *everything.* Instead, he sat there, as the corridor quietened down, and none of them said very much at all.

The days slid into each other. One time in Transfiguration Dumbledore stopped him, offering his sincerest sympathy, and Harry nodded, staring at a patch of the wall behind his head unseeingly. He went to classes in a robotic fashion, played Quidditch with no real enthusiasm, talked to Abraxas and Belinda only when asked a question.

Everything blurred together, so much that it was a shock when he came face to face with Rosier—both of them blinking in surprise, the bathroom lights dim, the silence tense.

'You,' Rosier said, 'who the fuck do you think you are, Potter?'

His voice was low, raspy, different from what it had been. Nasally and hoarse, Rosier had dark circles under his eyes, which were shining in unmasked dislike.

'Finally speaking again, then?'

'You piece of shit,' he said. 'You fucking blood-traitor *bitch.* You think

you're so special because Tom paid attention to you for a moment. Well, you were new, not special. And now — 'he cleared his throat and the wheezing noise ruined the effect he was going for. 'He doesn't care anymore. Nothing captures his attention forever, especially not *you*.'

The second where Harry had felt sorry for Rosier disappeared. 'Do you know that from personal experience? Is that what you're really mad about, your great *lord* not giving you attention anymore?'

'He'll always have me. You're nothing but an orphan and a blood-traitor and when everyone realises, it's going to be *bad,* Potter. He's going to get bored and when he does, he'll see you're nothing but a filthy traitor. Do you know what happens to filthy traitors in Slytherin?'

Rosier's breath was particularly rancid as he hissed at him. 'Your life is going to be *ruined,* I promise you. Tom's already done with you though, isn't he? Do you know what comes next?'

'I assume you're going to tell me anyway.'

'You become *nothing.* Absolutely nothing. You think you're friends with Abraxas? The Quidditch team? None of them would take your side over his. No-one would.'

'Right,' Harry said coldly, 'this little problem we have, Rosier, it's time to end it. Do you understand?'

'I'm not scared of you,' he said, meeting Harry's eyes. 'You think you're so clever because you have *him* on your side. But just me and you — what are you going to do? You're a *coward*.'

Harry was barely aware of flicking his wand, barely aware until Rosier was pressed against the wall behind him, eyes wide.

'Oh?' Harry said, stepping forward until they were an inch apart. 'You're going to beat me then? Is that what you think? You?'

'You fucking —'

'Fucking *what?'*

He licked his lips quickly, glancing at Harry as his throat bobbed. 'He's going to kill you,' he said. 'I promise you.'

Harry laughed. ‘You’re not going to do it, then? Pity. You know what, Rosier, I’d say so too. It’s going to be a bloodbath. You shouldn’t get involved.’

‘You’re crazy,’ he hissed. ‘Whatever Grindelwald did —you’re fucked up, aren’t you Potter? Completely mental.’

‘Maybe I am,’ Harry said, ‘and you know what that means? You should stay away or disobeying *Tom Riddle* won’t be your only concern.’

For a second, he was sure Rosier was going to say something. His lips were white and trembling. Harry looked down at his hands, clenched in the collar of Rosier’s robe, and after a moment Rosier’s eyes flickered away.

Harry let go of his robe and took a step back. As Rosier straightened up, he glared at him—so fiercely, so intensely, that Harry shook his head.

‘Don’t make me your enemy, Rosier,’ he said, ‘because right now, I don’t care much about what you think. I don’t care if you like me or not, or who you want to cry about it to. But you don’t want to see what happens when I *do* care.’

Rosier said nothing. He looked at Harry—a strange expression, part-surprise, part something else. ‘Piss off, Potter,’ he said, in that hoarse, raspy voice.

Harry left the bathroom.

The first few potions classes were completed in silence. Harry didn’t talk to Tom; didn’t do anything except follow the instructions on the board, zone out during lessons, and ignore the prickling in his head. Tom said nothing either. He only looked at him, with his unfathomable eyes, as if waiting for Harry to break the silence, *Harry* to seek *him* out.

It was the end of the week when the illusion shattered.

Professor Slughorn had them revising antidotes and the classroom was

heavy with the putrid stench of bubotuber pus. Harry's cauldron was bubbling and he busied himself with following the instructions, watching the agonisingly slow clock hands tick past.

'Are you going to continue avoiding me then? *Really?'*

Tom's voice was so indignant, so entitled, that Harry didn't turn to face him. 'Pretty much,' he said, flicking the yellowing page of his textbook.

'So I found out the truth. What are you going to do? Pretend like it makes a difference?'

I've known for ages.

Harry very firmly looked at his potion. It was bubbling steadily, thick and orange, only a shade paler than the picture before him.

'I liked you much better when you were unaware.'

He breathed through his nostrils. The clock hands had barely moved — there was a gruelling hour and a half left. 'I don't really care what you like, Tom.'

'But really — 'Tom's voice sounded closer, soft and smooth and coaxing. 'You've been keeping all these secrets. All these grand, life-shattering secrets. Isn't it *freeing* that you don't have to hide behind them anymore?'

'No,' Harry said, 'it's not. It's —'

Unbearable.

'It's over, all of it. You've got what you wanted. Your biggest mystery, what you've obsessed over for months, what you've tried and tried to find out. You know now, Tom, so congratulations.'

A crease appeared on Tom's forehead. The steam from their cauldrons had caused his hair to curl slightly at the front.

'You wanted to find out my secrets. It *drove* you the whole year, and you got it, you had it, but now it's not enough. Do you feel powerful?' Harry scoffed. 'The Great Dark Lord that you are, with your hidden knowledge, your superiority, once again having things your way? Or are you still *bored?'*

Tom shifted in his chair and Harry forgot that they were in class, that

there were dozens of students around them.

‘You want me to get angry,' Tom said. ‘You want a distraction to fool yourself into thinking you're doing the right thing. But there isn’t one anymore. I know about the future now too. And Harry — ‘a smile— ‘you’ve *always* known. Every horrible act I’ve committed, every murder, every plan. I’d do them all again.’

Harry didn’t react and Tom’s face contorted.

‘What does that make you, if you can’t stay away from the person who killed all your loved ones?’

‘*I* can’t stay away? You’re practically obsessed with me. You think it’s exciting, the fact that I *can’t stand you — ‘*

‘Is that so? Lie all you want, dear, we both know the truth. You want to hate me, you think it would be so *easy,* and you could ignore everything that happened, as if that would achieve anything.’

He was watching Harry steadily. ‘I have no delusions about who I am, but you? You don’t know who you are when you’re not trying to live up to some image or expectation. You’re scared to think about what it would make you if you just gave in.’

‘You’re so conceited. Do you really think you’re that great? That I like you one bit right now? I’m done playing your stupid games, Tom. You can’t *have* me or ruin things any more than they already are. Find something else to obsess over.’

He glanced at the clock from the corner of his eye and swore under his breath.

‘I don’t want to. You’re being childish, you know. There’s no reason things have to change.’

Harry laughed. ‘What a shame for you then, Tom, because there are these things called *consequences.* And one of yours? I can’t even stand to look at you anymore.’

‘Because I ruined your future? Everything you’ve ever told me is a *lie.* You know everything about me, from the moment you arrived here. And now that I can see you, now I have *this* . . . You’re scared.’

Harry snatched up a handful of knotgrass and dumped it into his cauldron. Immediately, the potion began to gurgle, thick clouds of

black steam rising between them.

'You've told yourself that it's okay because you're going to *kill me.* Isn't that it? All this was only *temporary?* And now there are no more pretences —'

A fistful of beetles and the liquid began to bubble frantically. Four spider eyes.

'You *bastard,'* Harry said.

The barest hint of shock on Tom's face. Whether it was from the venom in Harry's tone or the mess he had made of his potion, Harry wasn't sure.

'Do you know what the real freeing thing is?' Harry said. 'It's you finally taking it one step too far. Finally messing everything up so badly that I'll never forgive you. You've given me the perfect incentive to end it, *forever.* Whatever you think, whatever stupid ideas you have about us, they're over.'

The smoke was making his head spin. Before Tom could reply, he lifted his wand and waved it over his potion. Flames erupted from the cauldron between them, acid green and licking their way towards the ceiling.

Harry stood up from his seat, casually stowing his bag. Somewhere behind them, Slughorn's voice was rising as he hurried over.

'*Out, out, everyone in the corridor right now. Merlin, what on Earth — is that —'*

Harry took one last look at Tom — shock, anger, the barest hint of admiration? – and his mouth tasted sour. Ignoring Slughorn's shouting, his urgent spell-casting, Harry left the classroom.

The flames, he knew, wouldn't damage the room. They would be enough to keep them out of the lesson though, and for Slughorn to swear and shout as he calmed the mess Harry had created.

People were babbling amongst themselves in the corridor. Harry saw a glint of Tom's dark hair — glad to see he was frazzled—and ducked

away from him and the mill of students.

He raised a finger to his throbbing scar, adrenaline coursing through his body. Two people were hurrying down the hall towards him, their footsteps loud.

'Harry!'

'Mate, what was all that about?'

'God, I don't know how you can stand it. Being around him like that —'

He was grateful that there was no anger on Ron and Hermione's face. Only shock and concern, bright and overwhelming.

'I had to create a distraction,' Harry said quietly, 'I couldn't . . .'

Ron nodded knowingly and Hermione pursed her lips. 'What was he saying to you?' she said, 'it looked heated.'

'Oh, he was just being a prick.' Harry rubbed the back of his neck. 'Saying that he's known for ages and I'm overreacting. Isn't it good to have no more secrets, that I know all about his life so it's only fair, blah, blah, blah—'

Ron's eyebrows furrowed. 'He said *that?'*

'Yeah,' Harry said, 'you don't know Tom. He's a spoiled, self-centred, deluded git.'

'It sounds like he wants you to forgive him,' Hermione said, 'really, I wasn't expecting *that.* No wonder you both looked so flustered. You must have been so annoyed, having to be around him, and he's *unbothered* by it all.'

'Well, Tom he's—'

Whatever Tom was he didn't get to say. Harry's words died in his throat as Belinda and Abraxas hurried towards him.

'You did *not* just create that fiasco to avoid Tom, did you?' Abraxas said, sounding quite delighted with the fact. 'You know he's going to murder you, right?'

'He can try.'

‘Merlin, Harry, you should have seen Professor Slughorn’s face when your cauldron *exploded*.’ He waved his hand to demonstrate the point and then his eyes fell on Ron and Hermione and his smile slipped.

Belinda had frozen at once when she saw them. Her face was guarded, her arms crossed over her chest.

‘Oh,’ Abraxas said and there was a long moment where they simply stared at each other.

‘Malfoy,’ Ron said, voice stiffer. ‘*Lestrange.’*

Belinda tilted her head. ‘Weasley. Granger.’

‘Tried to rob anyone lately?’

Belinda stilled and Abraxas’ eyes narrowed. ‘*What* did you say to her, Weasley?’

‘Ask Lestrange,’ Ron said, and both of them took a step forward.

‘Stop,’ Harry snapped, *‘both* of you.’ He shared a look with Ron—tense, lingering—and Ron nodded jerkily. ‘This is ridiculous,’ Harry said, ‘you don’t even *know* each other.’

‘We’re met,’ Ron said coolly.

Belinda stared back at him, unblinkingly.

‘So,’ Hermione said, clearing her throat. ‘We’re all —um—friends with Harry here.’

Harry felt a rush of gratefulness towards her. ‘Right. There’s no need for this hostility —’

Ron made an unimpressed noise and Abraxas scoffed. ‘What’s your problem with Belinda, Weasley?’

Ron answered a second too late. ‘Ask her,’ he said, and then turned to Harry, jerking his head in question: *what am I meant to say?*

‘Right,’ Harry said, looking at all of them. ‘I know there’s a certain . . . tension between the houses but this is ridiculous. Ron, Belinda’s my friend. All of you need to get over this stupid *prejudice* — ‘

‘She’s your friend?’ Hermione said.

‘Why, Granger, is Harry too good for us lowly Slytherins?’ Belinda raised her eyebrows and Hermione faltered.

‘No,’ she said, ‘I just don’t trust you.’

‘You’ve made it pretty hard for me to betray you now, I think.’

‘For a good reason!’

They all wilted under Harry’s disbelieving gaze. ‘Abraxas,’ he said slowly, ‘you were asking about Tom, right?’

A curt nod. Hermione and Belinda were engaged in a silent staring contest; Abraxas and Ron were both looking at Harry helplessly, willing him to take their side.

‘I did blow up the potion. He was being a bastard —I mean, he’s always a bastard, obviously, but I didn’t want to talk to him. Never mind, *sit there*— ‘

‘You’re still arguing?’ Abraxas said, blowing out a breath. ‘God, whatever it was . . . it must have been *bad.’*

‘It was,’ Harry agreed, aware that Belinda’s eyes had narrowed and her gaze left Hermione and landed on him.

‘Riddle’s such a fucking *git,*’ Ron said, so venomously that Abraxas turned to look at him.

‘Why? What did —’

But Harry shook his head and once again there was silence. Abraxas was hopping from foot to foot. Ron was looking at Harry and then Belinda as if trying to find a hint of truth to his words.

‘I guess we’ll see you around later,’ Hermione said awkwardly. The students had cleared out around them, leaving the corridor still.

‘See you, Granger,’ Belinda said, equally as cold. ‘And you, Weasley.’

‘So, yeah, uh —’ Harry wanted to laugh at how helpless Abraxas looked but instead he felt cold. With the two separate parts of his life laid out side by side, it was clear how much distance was between them. He could never merge them, never make everything magically okay.

‘Are you coming to lunch?’ Abraxas said.

Harry cleared his throat. ‘In a minute,’ he said, ‘you can go on if you want, I’m going to apologise to Slughorn for the mess I made.’

‘Oh, he’ll probably think it was a bit of fun.’

But Abraxas and Belinda did leave and after a few moments with Ron and Hermione —*I bet he was dying to call me a mudblood; is she really going to pretend she didn’t lie to you for* weeks*?* —he went back into Slughorn’s classroom. Abraxas was right: Slughorn did think it was a bit of fun.

‘We all have off days,’ he said, waggling a finger and handing Harry his cauldron, which now had a burn mark down the side. Harry helped him put away loose ingredients, stacking them on the long, dusty shelves. ‘I must say, sometimes I forget what I’m doing too. Are you sure you’re alright, Harry? You look a bit distracted.’

And eventually —after several prodding questions that included his fight with Tom (*I heard, of course, terrible thing, you two are so close)*— Harry ducked out of the room and down the quiet hall. The adrenaline rush had died away, leaving something cold in its place. He hadn’t thought it would bother him, the clear dislike between his friends. He had known it, hypothetically, but seeing it was very different.

He reached the top of the steps. Voices were flooding from behind the Great Hall door, booming and bright, heavy with laughter. The thought of seeing Tom again—a smirk, those eyes, a brush against his arm, slow, teasing—was enough to turn him away.

He stood there a moment, between the steps leading to the dungeons and the stretch of lit up corridor ahead, listening to those voices floating past. Then there was a louder one, coming from his left.

‘Harry,’ Belinda said, stepping out from a nearby classroom, shaking out her hair. ‘Want to skip lunch with me?’

‘Yes,’ he said immediately, ‘where do you want to go?’

She looked around: suits of armour shining silver in the light, gilded portraits chatting amongst themselves.

‘Out, I think,’ she said, giving Harry a quick look. When she spoke again, they were halfway to the front doors. ‘He knows, doesn’t he? Tom?’

Harry forced down his surprise. ‘Knows what?’

‘Come on, Harry, a*ll of it.* Nothing else would have caused — this.’

He didn’t speak until they were out in the chilly air. The sky was beginning to darken, purple and grey, heavy clouds looming overhead. Everything was cold and still and Harry exhaled slowly, his breath hanging like smoke in the air. The pain in his head was more prominent now, and as they walked along the grassy paths, he stuffed his hands in his cloak pockets.

‘I wasn’t going to mention it,’ Belinda said, ‘it’s not my business, obviously, but no-one else who isn’t affected knows. I mean, Weasley and Granger — they look *awful.’*

‘I think they’re holding up pretty well, all things considered.’

‘I didn’t mean it like that. I’m surprised you’re not all expelled by a botched murder attempt though.’

‘Yes, well, we did consider the possibility.’

She shivered in the cold air and when he offered her his cloak, shook her head. ‘How did it happen anyway? Was it that day in the boys’ dorm?’

That day in the boys’ dorm. Could it be simplified like that?

‘He read Ron and Hermione’s minds,’ Harry said. The words were snatched by the wind. ‘I don’t know how much he knows but it’s enough. It’s the time-travel and the fact he’s *Voldemort* and that it was my job to kill him.’

His hands were numb in his pockets. Belinda’s long, white hair was blowing around her face.

‘I don’t think I told you that but it was my responsibility to kill Voldemort. He tried to kill me as a baby but it didn’t work, and there was a prophecy —’

‘You believe in prophecies?’

‘No, but . . . ‘It was hard to explain now that it wasn’t happening around him. That part of his life was detached, strange. ‘They called me the Chosen One. And *Voldemort* believed the prophecy. Dumbledore left me this job. He was like the leader of the — resistance? Anyway, it doesn’t matter anymore. Tom knows now and none of that’s going to happen the same way.’

‘Are you angry,’ she said, ‘at Tom or yourself?’

They had reached the lake. With the absence of sunlight, the surface was black and the scent of damp and algae reached Harry’s nose.

‘I was the one who got us here,’ he said, ‘and now it seems like we’re never going to get back.’ He looked away from the water to her. ‘We found a time-turner. A pocket-watch in the Lestrange vault.’

Her lips twisted into a sort of half-smile. ‘You’re only telling me this now?’

Harry didn’t say anything.

Her smile slipped. ‘I’ve never seen anything like that.’

‘I figured.’

They looked at the lake again and the forest looming in the distance.

‘What were you doing in the Lestrange vault?’

Harry smiled. ‘Would you believe me if I said we broke into Gringotts?’

‘I would now.’

The sky overhead gave a loud rumble and Harry looked up. It was already darker than it had been moments ago. They would need to light their wands soon, go inside, but strangely he didn’t want to.

‘I think,’ Belinda said, ‘there wasn’t much hope of you getting back to the future anyway. And you all knew it but you clung to that little shred of hope anyway. Just being here changed everything. Tom knowing doesn’t make much difference in the grand scheme of things. It was already gone.’

A drop of rain hit his glasses and then another until his entire vision was overtaken by fuzzy circles. ‘But it makes it impossible,’ he said, ‘and it makes him unpredictable. Before, I knew what his next step of action was. I had that, at least, and I knew I could do something. Maybe things will go the same way but . . .’

‘Your presence here already changed Tom. I know you can’t see it but he’s —different. Unsettled. And could you go back anyway? Leave him here?’

Harry bristled. ‘Of course I could.’

‘I don’t mean like that.’ The rain was landing in her fine hair. ‘You think he’s your responsibility. If you went back to the future, you would be condemning everyone to a lifetime of pain and war. You’d be allowing it to happen. But while you’re here you can prevent it.’

‘I know that but Tom —’

He was under no impression that he could change Tom. Tom couldn’t change, the same way Harry—while being bent and twisted out of shape—couldn’t either. But while he couldn’t change Tom, he could change the outcome. He could *try*.

‘I wanted Ron and Hermione to go back,’ he said. ‘I want them to be happy. Ron’s family, Hermione’s – they’ve lost them all now.’

He took off his glasses and wiped them. Water was settling in his hair and when he put them back on, everything was streaky.

‘Ron’s parents rushed into their marriage. It was fuelled by the war. The war that no longer *exists.* And I wish I could fix it in some way but god — I can barely look at him.’

Red hair. Those similar eyes. The hurt there, unmasked and raw.

‘Well, look at it this way. There’s no war here, at least not yet. It doesn’t have to happen again, and your old life didn’t sound fun.’

Those endless summers at the Weasleys. The orchard where they used to play Quidditch, abuzz with bees and the scent of pollen. Laughing with Fred and George until his insides hurt.

‘Some of it was.’

‘It’s *gone.’*

The rain was heavier now and a thin mist had settled over the lake, obscuring the forest.

‘I think you have a choice,’ she said. ‘Being here – you can use it as an opportunity to change things. Or you can think about what it could have been, all those years and memories and people, and let it ruin you.’

There was a flash and the lake lit up white, the skeletal trees of the forest illuminated. Seconds later, the crack of thunder and Belinda

stepped back.

‘We should go inside,’ Harry said, ‘you know, before —’

The rain came fast. What was a damp drizzle became a downpour. It bounced off the ground, their faces, made Harry’s glasses so foggy that all he could see was the *white* of the lighting engraved in his brain.

Belinda laughed, a breathless, surprised sound. ‘Too late for that now,’ she said.

Another crack of thunder and they ran to the castle, feet squelching in the soaked grass, its echoes reverberating after them.

He spent a few hours in the library with Ron and Hermione — none of them saying much, the quiet scratch of quills filling the air, eventually dying into silence. Had tea with Abraxas and Belinda (scar hot and throbbing, *ignore, ignore, ignore),* lay in the bath until the water became cold, and eventually, went to the dorm.

This was the worst bit.

It all came back in that long stretch of night. While he could glide through the day, block it out, detach, his mind came alive when he was alone in his four-poster, staring at the dark ceiling.

Harry was opening his trunk —shards of broken glass, a balled-up pair of black socks, a bent quill —when the door creaked and someone stepped over the threshold. He *knew* without looking up. Those soft footsteps, the stillness.

‘You can’t avoid me forever, you know.’

Harry stood. He couldn’t decipher Tom’s face — a muddled mix of curiosity and apprehension. Careful, contemplative.

‘Slughorn asked me to speak to him,’ Tom continued, ‘earlier. Apparently, we’re *squabbling.’*

‘Fascinating.’

‘I didn’t tell him the truth, of course. *That* would have been interesting

though, wouldn't it?'

Harry gave him a flat look. 'What do you want, Tom?'

'Well—'a smile, sly—'what are you offering?'

Harry didn't dignify that with a response. He looked at Tom for a moment, headache fading, the silence between them still and expectant.

'I think you should get over it,' Tom said, stepping forward. From the porthole-shaped window behind his head was the murky blackness of the lake. 'So there's no future anymore. There never was anyway.'

'I don't really care.'

'*And —'* this time his voice was smoother, almost confiding. As if it was just the two of them, *their* secret, and his argument was so logical, so irrefutable, that Harry would have no choice but to agree. 'I didn't exactly lie to you.'

Harry ignored the instinct to move back. The instinct to punch him in his stupid, false face. 'Oh? What do you call it then? Avoiding the truth?'

'It was pretty much unspoken anyway. Your future's destroyed. I know it, *you* know it, we both have for ages.'

'So I should forgive you? Pretend it's all fine?'

Harry could hear his own heart hammering and see the way Tom's eyes were locked on his face. The half-open button at the front of his robes and the barest hint of a collarbone.

Tom shrugged. 'Why not? Do you *like* moping around about something you can't control? You've been here months without thinking about your other life. It could all go back to normal.'

Normal. There was nothing normal about Tom and him, and yet somehow . . .

Somehow it didn't have to be. It was easy. *Right.*

'Don't you want that?' He brushed a piece of Harry's still-damp hair away from his eyes. His fingertip was *warm*. '*I* want that.'

What had been a background sensation was now overwhelmingly

clear. That numbness, that drifting, meaningless cloud of smoke and dust; the *heaviness* of his whole body. Weighed and dragged down, unbothered but not enough, still there, only clouded. Unfocused.

Because being around Tom was like an electric shock to his mind. It sent a rush of blood through him, kick-started his nervous system. Heart hammering, lungs filling, emotions stark and clear, the world was a vivid blur. And it was such a *change* to escape the numbness, to feel something, anything.

'There's nothing you can do,' Tom said. 'There's no point fighting it anymore, there's just *now*. The time you've spent here, the choices you made.'

Harry could see every one of Tom's eyelashes, the flecks of brown in his eyes. Tom, who was so assured, so trusting in his own abilities. He reached out a hand and touched Tom's cheek. 'Yeah,' he said, as softly as he could, letting his finger linger a moment.

Tom's eyes lit up. Raw, triumphant, they gleamed in unmasked victory.

'But,' Harry continued, taking a step away. He watched Tom blink, surprise bloom on his handsome face, and he allowed his lips to curve into a smile. *'No*.'

The Confession

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was the end of the week when Hermione dragged him to the Hospital Wing. Harry had yawned his way through Charms, staggered into Defence, and spent several minutes blinking blearily as Professor Merrythought asked him a question, her voice as vague and muffled as a wasp buzzing nearby.

'How many hours of sleep did you get?' Hermione whispered. Harry's face felt warm. People were looking at them across the room, a quiet but steady whisper beginning to build.

'Five,' he lied, but even that made her frown deepen.

'Well, what about in general? Like this week, and last week —'

Last week? What even *happened* last week? He remembered it in brief snatches. Was that when Tom found out about the time-travel? Or had it been longer?

'Like, five,' he said. 'Or less. Maybe *more.* I don't stare at the clock all night.'

Harry rubbed a hand over his face. His scar was prickling steadily and he was overcome with the impulse to find Tom across the room. What was he thinking about? If he really concentrated on his scar —on the dull, insistent throb—it became overwhelming. Like a banging inside his head, only noticed when he paid attention. But now that he *had* —

Harry massaged his temples. 'I'll pay more attention,' he said, 'really. And I'll try to sleep —'

He yawned loudly and her face softened. 'Harry,' she said quietly, '*can* you sleep? Is it nightmares?'

'No, it's . . . my mind. It *races,* and everything — I mean, everything — is going through my head. It's so *quiet* and I can't shut it out like I do during the day....' He trailed off.

Ron had ditched the class, claiming a stomach-ache. He had looked so pale and pinched that Professor Flitwick accepted it immediately, but

Harry knew he was going back to the dorm. To do *what* he wasn't sure.

'I haven't —' he began, eyes impossibly heavy. 'I haven't *slept* properly since it happened.'

If anything, the thoughts were more insistent. At least when he was exhausted, things began to slow down and blur.

'You should take a sleeping draught,' Hermione said. 'Harry, you look like a *wreck*. You can't just go around like a zombie all day.'

Her face was tight and concerned and he found himself agreeing instinctively. He let her drag him to the Hospital Wing (Ron nowhere in sight) and let matron fuss and prod him, asking questions like: *do you sleepwalk, dear? How often are you having nightmares?*

She shone her wand in his eyes and murmured a spell that made the ache in his bones disappear. Eventually — after pressing cold fingers against his forehead — she allowed Harry to have a weeks worth of sleeping draught, and urged him to come back for another check-up.

At this, Harry shot Hermione an annoyed look and she had the grace to look embarrassed.

'Really,' he said again, 'I'm fine. I think this has been blown out of proportion —'

Hermione cleared her throat. 'Sleeping draughts are addictive, aren't they?' she said to the matron, ignoring Harry entirely.

'Yes, dear, and that's why I'm wary even giving him a week's dose.' She turned to him, her eyes sharp. 'I have to warn you not to take more than one per night —they're very strong, I guarantee the prescribed dose will have you sleeping like the dead.'

She chatted with Hermione for a few moments —who seemed convinced Harry was going to become an addict—and his insides dropped. *Sleep like the dead.*

'So while you're asleep,' Harry said, 'how deep of a sleep are we talking about? What exactly would wake me up?'

'Well, as the dose wears off — after around five hours — you'll be left in a light sleep and you'll wake yourself as normal. It's only during those couple of hours after consumption that you'll be in a deeper,

magically-induced sleep. You'd still *wake* of course, if there was a loud disturbance, but otherwise —' She shrugged. 'You'll be pretty dead to the world.'

As they left the Hospital Wing, Hermione looped her arm through his and went quiet. They had reached a staircase when she paused. 'You're not going to take them, are you?'

Harry didn't bother denying it. He couldn't anyway, not when she was so unwaveringly helpful, or when her jaw was stubbornly set like that.

'No,' he said, 'I can't, not with *him* in the dorm. It's bad enough sleeping, never mind being so vulnerable. Anything could happen.' His fingers had started twitching and he stuffed them in his pockets.

Hermione didn't argue but sighed, in a sad, knowing way. 'That's probably for the best,' she said. 'I really wish you were a Gryffindor, you know.'

The words surprised him so much that he almost tripped on the step. 'It would be a lot easier,' he agreed. 'Maybe.'

She laughed. 'Mmm, I suppose Riddle wouldn't have the same initiative then. But really, Harry, are you sure you're okay? With *him?'*

They had stopped on the stairs and the expression on Hermione's face made his throat dry. It was so painfully earnest, so searching.

'Of course I am,' he said, 'are *you* okay?'

She shook the question off. 'Because you and Riddle—'tentative, unsure— 'were you friends?'

He felt like he had stopped breathing. A heartbeat passed, and Hermione knew him too well, would be able to scrutinise his face and find an answer. 'Something like that,' he said.

It came to him with a painful acuteness: the urge to confess and the icy, all intense *fear*. It would be the end of them. The end of their friendship, the trio, and the last thing he had to hold onto.

'Anyway,' Harry said, forcing his voice to stay steady. 'How are things in Gryffindor with you and Ron?'

She squeezed his arm. 'They're okay. I - I've been thinking about my

parents recently, and how I left them in Australia. It's so *stupid* because it's gone now but I can't stop thinking about how that's the last thing they'll remember — or if there's another universe out there, how they'll never know. And it's for the best, but I wish I could have broken the memory charm. Now I *never* will, and the last memory I have is where they don't even recognise me.'

Her eyes were brimming with tears. 'And Harry,' she said, voice small and strangled, 'what if I did it *wrong?* What if they have flashes of the past and get confused, or I've messed them up completely?' She shook her head. 'I know it's silly. I know they're probably just *gone* and it doesn't matter. It was my choice to do it, I knew the risk —'

Harry wrapped his arms around her and Hermione stopped talking at once. She buried her head into his shoulder, sobs thick and muffled.

'It's not silly,' he said, as softly as he could. 'You're a brilliant witch, Hermione, don't doubt yourself now. I know you cast a perfect charm on them. They were *happy*, I promise you. You gave them a good life in Australia and you did the spell correctly because you do every spell correctly.'

She gripped the material of his robe tighter in her hand and her sobs quietened.

'It's not fair,' Harry said, 'that you had to lose them like that. But casting that spell wasn't your fault. You didn't mess them up, and you shouldn't feel guilty —'

His voice caught at the end. 'And — '*I'm so sorry.* 'I promise, Hermione, you did the right thing based on the situation. No-one could have known we'd end up here.'

Awkwardly, he rubbed her shoulder and Hermione looked up, eyes bright. 'I know,' she said, 'I know, god I just — 'she rubbed her eyes. 'Ron and I — he won't *talk* to me, Harry. Neither of you will. But I thought we were closer now. I mean, who else does he have? *We're* going through this too.'

'He needs time,' Harry said. 'He's angry and frustrated, but not at you. Just don't press him too much. I know you don't mean to —'

He gently let go of her shoulder. 'It's not you, Hermione. I promise, Ron's mental about you. He was in a right state when he thought you weren't talking.'

‘Really?’

‘Really,’ he said, and as they went down the stairs, Harry tried not to trip as everything came acutely into focus. The intensity of the light through the stained-glass windows, the portraits — god, they were *loud*.

‘You should talk to Slughorn, Harry,’ Hermione said, ‘about changing dorms or finding somewhere else to sleep. If you give him a valid reason —’

‘Like what, his favourite student is a murderous psychopath?’ He laughed. ‘No, it’ll pass. It’s just this week and finding out about the future.’ The lies slid easily from his lips and he squeezed Hermione’s arm again, blinking away the spots floating before his eyes. ‘I’ll be alright soon, really.’

‘Okay, Harry. And if there’s anything wrong—even if you don’t think you can tell me — ‘

Her eyes were so trusting and he was the worst friend in the world. ‘I know, Hermione,’ he said, chest tight, something heavy resting over his heart. ‘I will.’

Harry had been avoiding Dumbledore for the past few weeks — been ducking his eyes in Transfiguration and squashing down feelings of bitterness every time he thought of the future. It had been easy too, as Dumbledore was hard to find alone these days: when he wasn’t attending conferences and trials, he had a flock of admiring students asking for tips to improve their magic.

Now, Harry lingered behind in Transfiguration as the students trickled out. His hands shook as he stowed his bag and he stuffed a spare quill in the pocket of his robe.

He hadn’t been there when Ron and Hermione told Dumbledore about the time-travel. Hadn’t been able to face him — those clear, expressive eyes, surely to look on in shame.

‘Sir,’ he said finally, as the door swung closed and the voices outside became muffled. Light was shining through the windows and dancing

on the rolls of parchment upon Dumbledore's desk. 'I'm sorry for avoiding you. Ever since, well —'

How long had he been avoiding Dumbledore? Unable to meet his eyes, insides hot with shame and guilt.

Ever since Tom.

'—All of it.'

Dumbledore moved from the desk and waved his wand so the rolls of parchment stacked themselves neatly. 'Not at all,' he said, 'I'm sure you had your reasons. And Harry, I must say again that I'm awfully sorry about what happened. I know how badly you wanted to get back.'

In the silence of the room, Harry was aware of Dumbledore's eyes — mild, probing — without even looking at him.

'You defeated Grindelwald,' he said, 'because it was the right thing to do. You just *did* it.' He looked up. 'Do you think I'm a bad person?'

If Dumbledore was thrown by the question — or the sheer bluntness of Harry's tone — he didn't show it. 'I think the contrary. There are very few people with your heart, Harry, or your desire to do the right thing.'

'But that's all it is, a desire. I know logically that Tom — that Riddle — is *bad.* And I hate him, I *want* to hate him but —'

His scar was throbbing again, and Harry had the urge to pick at it, to dip his nails in deep like a scab and relish in the spike of pain.

'But instead, he's here at Hogwarts. And it's only a matter of years before he's on his way to becoming Voldemort again. How can I *allow* that? How can you allow that? Because ignoring it all, pretending it's fine and it's in the future — 'he blew out a breath. God, what was *wrong* with him?

It seemed that he couldn't stop talking but now that he had, he lost his train of thought. Harry tried to think back but his whole head felt foggy and that snatch of memory, that thing he wanted to cling onto, was fading.

'And —'

His fingers were twitching again but he couldn't quite get them to still.

'And I don't know what to do because I can't *kill* him. He has horcruxes anyway and there's nothing infused with basilisk venom to destroy them.'

And if he did . . .

Harry's throat dried at the thought.

'But the real twisted thing? I don't even know if I *want* to. Why can't Tom be someone else's responsibility for a change? Why's it always up to me?'

Blinking. The classroom was so *bright*.

'Harry,' Dumbledore said, and his tone was so soft that Harry stopped babbling at once.

Now all he could hear was his foot tapping against the ground, in a quick, restless rhythm. Why did he come here again? What was he even saying?

'I don't know,' he began, 'I'm sorry I don't . . .'

To stop himself talking, Harry clenched his jaw. Now, when he looked at Dumbledore all he saw was concern.

'Harry, Tom Riddle is not your responsibility. Despite how things may have been in your time, or whatever weight was placed upon your shoulders, here you shouldn't have those pressing concerns. I am well aware of what Tom Riddle is capable of. I can assure you that if — or when — he goes down the route we predict, the problem will be taken care of. Now or in the future, the responsibility does not fall to you.'

His mouth was dry. He was hearing but not comprehending. Rubbing his eyes, Harry focused on the words. 'So you'll, what, *kill* him?'

Dumbledore sighed, long and weary. 'If it comes to that,' he agreed, 'though I would prefer, of course, imprisonment and the destruction of his horcruxes. I don't plan on allowing this war you speak of to happen, Harry, not after Grindelwald, and not knowing what I do now.'

He said it so steadily — with so much conviction — that the weight in

Harry's chest loosened and his foot finally stopped tapping.

It wasn't Dumbledore's responsibility to defeat Voldemort. But the gravity of it — the gravity of knowing Tom, of every moment that trickled past — wasn't entirely down to him either.

'Forgive me, Harry, but are you feeling well?'

Harry nodded instinctively then winced as pain flared into his head. 'I just have a headache,' he said, 'it's fine.'

Dumbledore's eyes were so shrewd that Harry glanced away. Seconds passed and he adjudged his bag, looking at a potted plant on the window-ledge with its pale, wilted leaves.

There was nothing more to say.

'I'm sorry, sir.' He made his way to the door, fingers finding the cold handle. 'For everything.'

'You have nothing to be sorry for, Harry.'

But even from Dumbledore it sounded like a lie.

The leather chair in the common room was cool against his forehead, and in the stillness of the room, Harry focused on the sound of the lake water hitting against the windows and the whispers of the snake carvings on the mantelpiece. They were lulling, hypnotic, the parseltongue faint and fleeting, like a gentle brush in his mind. He didn't bother looking up for a moment, not even when the shadows shifted and the footsteps stopped. But when he did – forcing his eyes to stay open – Tom's face came into focus.

'Tell me,' Tom said, voice smooth and level, 'why are you spending every waking moment torturing yourself?'

Harry blinked at him blearily. The hatred was squashed now, squashed by a heavy, pressing *something.* He found himself sighing, eyes closing against his will.

'Or should I say *every* moment. Because you don't sleep anymore, Harry, not with those dreams we share.'

At that, his eyes opened and a jolt went through his mind.

‘It’s quite annoying experiencing all this second-hand. All your moping around and wallowing and every moment you deprive yourself of sleep.’ He tilted his head as if disappointed by Harry’s lack of reaction.

Harry *couldn’t* have reacted, no matter how much he wanted to. His mind had slowed down, and those soft, goading words of Tom’s no longer mattered.

‘I’m so sorry about your discomfort,’ he said flatly and closed his eyes again, willing Tom to go away.

He didn’t.

Humming, he sat down beside him and Harry made an irritated, warning noise in the back of his throat.

‘You look positively *exhausted,’* Tom said, sounding quite amused. ‘But really, you need to end this self-destruction act. What do you think — if you don’t sleep, you can ignore it all? Going around in a fugue state lets you forget all the pressing matters on your mind?’

Harry said nothing. He wished more than anything that Tom would go away but he was too tired to argue with him or get up and move. All the anger had fizzled out of him and it was taking effort not to sink into the chair and let the heaviness overtake.

‘Harry.’

There was something odd in Tom’s voice — something cautious and soft — and Harry almost laughed, almost opened his eyes and laughed at how outlandish it was.

‘Just go away, Tom,’ he said. ‘Whatever you want — I don’t care. *Leave.’*

For a second, Tom said nothing and Harry sunk into the chair — fuzzy, darkness, *weight* — until there were fingers on his forehead, featherlight, gentle, and he jumped upwards, shoving Tom away.

It was like his brain had restarted. Harry twisted around in the chair to glare at him. ‘*Don’t* touch me.’

‘I thought you might have a temperature,’ Tom said mildly. ‘You

don't.'

If he got up would Tom follow? The idea of being alone in the dorm with him was even less appealing than this and so, watchfully him carefully, he moved further away.

'Do you have a headache?' Tom said, looking like he wanted to touch Harry's scar again, press his fingers against the hot outline.

'Nope,' Harry lied, 'why? Concerned*?'*

He smiled. '*Yes.'*

The words —in all their lovely, false glory —sent a sensation right through him. 'You're such a liar,' Harry said. 'Why do you still think I'll fall for it? I *know* when you're lying, I know every false sentence that comes from your mouth. It's not going to work.'

'Fine then,' Tom said, 'you're right. I don't care.'

He was still sitting there. He was still sitting there and Harry let out a sigh, long and low. 'Do you fancy leaving me alone or do I have to move?'

'It depends. Do you want to tell me about the future?'

'*No.'*

'It might help you process it. A fresh perspective, a way to let out all your guilt and shame …'

His voice had became a lull. Tom, Harry decided, as insufferable as he was, had a very pleasant voice. He could almost fall asleep to it.

'—I'm not going to judge you the way Weasley and Granger do. Because all those twisted little thoughts you keep buried? They mean nothing to me. Think of what I *know,* Harry, why not just tell me the rest?'

Harry laughed, and it sounded funny to his ears. 'I know,' he said, 'I'll tell you exactly what happened. A nice timeline detailing all your plans, all your victories and successes, and every little mistake you don't plan on repeating.'

He stared into Tom's eyes. 'I'll give you what you want because you always get what you want, right? Everyone can be *persuaded* if you persist enough.'

He was awake now. Looking at Tom was a rush— sensations finally going through his brain, something piercing the fog, like a sweet surge of adrenaline.

'The time-line sounds nice,' Tom agreed, 'those memories of Weasley and Granger's are awfully fuzzy.'

'I'll never tell you,' Harry said, 'not what you want to know.'

'Are you sure? I'm a very good listener. Think of it as a *story.'*

'A story that ultimately leads to you taking over the world? I'll pass.'

'I thought you might.' He was closer; the sofa was so *small.* 'Don't tell me then,' Tom murmured, 'stew in it, suffocate yourself under the fear . . . 'Very carefully, he touched Harry's cheek. 'Let it ruin you, all the what-ifs and plans you think I make.'

There was a grin in his voice. Against his skin, Tom's fingertips were cool, careful as though he was touching a wild animal, capricious and ready to flee at any moment.

'But Harry—' when he touched Harry's scar, all the tension drained from his body. 'You can't change it.'

For a moment, he let the feeling flood him. Sweet, intoxicating, that simple press of cool fingers against his scar. Then he pulled away and shifted, so they were facing each other.

'I won't give you what you want, Tom,' he said, 'that desire you have, to know it all and have it all, it's not going to happen. Don't even bother wasting your time.'

'I wouldn't call it a waste of time.' He studied Harry's face for a second. 'Did you do something to Rosier?'

Harry laughed. 'We spoke. Do you know *why* he's so set on hating me?'

Tom shrugged. 'Jealousy? He craves constant approval? I like you and not him?'

Despite everything, his stomach twisted at those words. 'Don't,' he said quietly, 'just don't, Tom.'

Leaning back into the chair, he avoided Tom's eyes — burning, intense, as though they saw right through him — and said, 'give me

one reason I should even look at you. A real one this time.'

'I'll offer you a fake but well-executed apology that you'll have to admire?'

Harry laughed. 'No.'

'Ultimately, your future was ruined anyway and there's nothing you could do?'

'Definitely not.'

'I'm unfeeling and evil and can't change?'

Harry shook his head. Some of the pain in it eased. There was a lightness now, a teasing edge to Tom's voice that trickled through the air and settled between them. Somehow, in his muddled state, Harry had let his guard down.

'I feel like you're not even trying,' he said.

Tom hummed, and now his grin was unmistakable. 'I'll suck your dick.'

All the air dispelled from Harry's lungs. 'You'll— 'he began, and it was truly a marvel, the way Tom could keep his face so straight and unbothered, even as Harry's cheeks flooded with heat. '. . . well, that's the most persuasive one so far.'

Tom laughed, a sharp, pleased sound, and Harry didn't know if he was being serious. That was the truly maddening thing about Tom: he could never predict him or anticipate what would come next.

'I told you I can be persuasive.'

'You're —' he rubbed a hand over his face. It felt so *warm.* 'Still no,' Harry said, 'you can't offer to give me a *blowjob* and expect me to forgive you. It's not happening.'

Tom hummed. 'It was a one-time offer, I'm afraid. I've officially taken it back.'

'How unfortunate.' Harry stopped himself, for — against his own will — he was grinning. And Tom, despite whatever he said, had *exactly* what he wanted.

The sofa was too small and he stood, the world tilting and spinning

before his eyes. ‘Nice try,’ Harry said, ‘waiting until I was half-asleep was a good touch. A pity it didn’t work though.’

‘Goodbye, Harry,’ Tom said, lips still curved, head tilted back against the chair. His eyes followed Harry as he moved away and his face revealed none of his triumph. ‘Tell me if you want a *distraction.’*

He winked and Harry almost tripped over the exploding snap cards scattered on the floor. Tom’s laughter that followed was harsh and bright and addicting.

‘It’s not going to happen,’ Harry said, some of the bitterness coming back to his voice. ‘You’re the opposite of a distraction. You’re everything I *hate.’*

‘Of course, Harry. Tell me, do Weasley and Granger know what you like to do in your free time? I wonder what they’d think of us. It’s a shame, really, that they don’t know.’

Harry didn’t respond to the remark the way Tom wanted. Turning away, he walked out of the common room, mind racing, feeling —for the first time in weeks—wide-awake.

It sounded like a threat. A sugar-coated, veiled hint about what else Tom could ruin. How *easily* he could walk up to Ron and Hermione, how he could smile while revealing Harry’s deepest shames, act unbothered while tearing him apart, exposing everything he kept buried. He could damage the only thing Harry was clinging onto. Ruin them, and leave Harry to struggle with the aftermath.

Thinking of it, Harry couldn’t breathe. He couldn't get his lungs to work, couldn’t feel anything but *terror,* terror so strong it rendered him immobile.

Harry tried to tamp down the dread that rose in him. Things were already ruined. Things would never be the same now, no matter how much he wanted them to be. They were *gone* and now in the aftermath . . . Why did it even matter anymore?

The thought of Tom holding that over him — the thought of Tom having the upper hand in any way — was enough to clear his mind. It

wouldn't happen because he wasn't going to bend to Tom's whims, clinging to secrets he couldn't control. He wouldn't let Tom have the power.

The rest of the day passed in a haze. The interaction came back to him at random moments: he'd see a flash of Tom's grinning face while eating, or hear the echoes of his soft, teasing voice while studying. He'd feel that familiar pulse of energy, briefly overriding everything else. A faint spark, a rush. But despite its sweet aftertaste, Harry was left with a unyielding resolve.

He didn't see Ron and Hermione the rest of the day, and in the evening, after yawning his way through dinner, he had Quidditch practice. Slytherin's second match was coming up against Hufflepuff, and throughout practice, Abraxas fretted and panicked, snapping at random players and missing goals.

His father was coming to the match for the first time since third year. 'That was when I got on the team,' he told Harry, as they showered under tepid water.

Harry's whole body felt like an enormous bruise. He had spent an hour looking for the snitch and had flown into three bludgers, one that left his left arm entirely numb. The pain in his head has resided though, and his thoughts had slowed down to something clear and steady.

'He wanted to see if I had any potential or was I wasting my time, so obviously, I made a complete fool out of myself. Father thinks Quidditch is nonsense.'

They were tying their shoes when he went on. 'And if I don't play well,' Abraxas said, running a hand through his wet hair to smooth it back, 'then no more fun and games. He'll make me keep my head down and start looking for jobs in the ministry. You know, *serious stuff.'*

Harry tried his best to reassure Abraxas it would be alright. 'Since when do you want to work in the ministry anyway?'

Abraxas laughed at the question. 'I can't exactly do *art* forever. It's not practical, not for a Malfoy. I'd be a disgrace, worse than one. Except — 'he sighed. 'I don't want a boring ministry job. I can't think of anything worse.'

'Then don't get one. You wouldn't be a disgrace, you'd be doing something that you're actually passionate about. Who cares if it's a

risk? It's better than being unhappy.'

'But, Harry, I —' he chewed his lip. 'It's who I *am.* I can't make decisions the way you can. I have this pressure, and these expectations — 'he caught himself. 'Sorry, that's rude. I mean, I know your family's dead, oh, Merlin —'

He winced and Harry laughed. 'Yeah,' he said, 'that's one of the only perks. I can be a complete disgrace and there's no-one's to care. But really, if you try to live the life that he wants you'll be unsatisfied. At least think about it.'

They made their way back to the common room, empty except for a scattering of students. The torches burned low and the emerald fires were dead.

'Are you coming to bed, Harry?' Abraxas said, fiddling with the ends of his tie.

Harry tore his eyes away from the embers, and the small silver eyes watching him from the mantel. 'Yeah,' he said, and Abraxas' shoulders sagged in relief. 'Yeah, I'm exhausted.'

But lying there among cold sheets and the stillness that couldn't be broken even by Rosier's thick, raspy snores, it settled in his mind.

Ginny. The last time he had seen her.

Ron who was a wreck and had lost so much more than Harry ever could. Yet they were mocking him in the silvery night, all those dead, accusing eyes and memories he clung to as if scared they would fade away.

Hands shaking a bit, Harry lifted a flask of dreamless sleep potion the matron had given him and uncorked it. He raised it to his mouth and paused, the scent of jasmine and lavender thick in the air.

Tom slept mere metres away. Tom slept light, almost as fitfully as Harry did. Heart beating, he craned his ears but the only sound was Rosier's raspy snores.

Placing the flask back in his trunk, Harry lay down. His eyes were so *heavy.* Why couldn't his mind be quiet? Give in like it so desperately needed to?

Harry placed his arm over his eyes and decided, in that brief snatch of

darkness. The past was overwhelming. It was enough to consume him. But the fear he clung onto? The dread, the suffocating guilt, every waking moment where he *lied?*

He had to let it go.

Rolling over, he focused on the erratic beats of his heart. The thought came to him before he drifted off, bringing with it both fear and a sickening sort of relief. It was a feverish thought, already rapidly growing and cementing in his mind. Spreading out and solidifying, twisting something deep inside.

He was going to tell Ron and Hermione.

It was the end of the week before he managed it. Days passed in blurry snapshots of colour and conversation, and the only thing that remained constant was the feeling of ever-growing dread. It rattled through his head, unspoken secrets and lies, the weight now physical.

It wasn't until they were in the library one day and Harry was fidgeting with the tip of his quill, fingers streaked in ink, that Hermione looked up from her books and said, 'spit it out. There's obviously something bothering you.'

Now he had admitted it to himself, it was only that much more obvious. The irony of the situation and how hypocritical he was. Every passing moment where Ron and Hermione were nice and sympathetic, where they trusted him, felt sorry for him, was a lie.

'You're going to hate me after it,' Harry said. The library was quiet, with only a few fifth and seventh years studying in small groups. All the lamps burned low, and the scratch of quills was the only sound between them. 'But I have to tell you because I . . . don't deserve this. I've been lying.'

Harry's head was light. A cold sweat prickled his skin, and in an effort not to snap his quill, he placed his hands on the desk and willed his voice to stop shaking. He wouldn't be like Tom. Tom who hid things—massive, earth-shattering secrets, in an attempt to keep things the same. Tom who was a *liar,* just the same as Harry.

‘I can’t pretend anymore. Pretend I’m not *that* and —’

Ron frowned at him across the table. He had a smudge of ink on his nose and violet circles beneath his eyes. ‘Lying about what?’ he said, his voice oddly careful.

‘About . . .’

His voice was dry. Why couldn’t he say it? Seeing them there — faces concerned and trusting — was more painful than he anticipated. Hermione, in her lumpy red scarf. Had she knitted it? He remembered SPEW with a pang, a pang so intense he almost swallowed down the lump in his throat and gave up there and then.

It was going to be the end. He was going to sever the only good thing in his life, the only thing keeping him whole. Was that the consequence of being honest? Losing it all? As the seconds ticked on, Harry wondered was it worth it.

‘Are you okay?’ Ron said, ‘you look ready to be sick. It can’t be that bad, mate.’

It was that soft concern that did it. Ron has no clue and if he *had* —

Harry licked his lips. ‘I just — ‘he said. It was the last moment and then he could never take it back. But since when had he deserved this anyway? Deserved them while he was lying, hiding, leading two separate lives?

‘I –’

They deserved the truth. He couldn’t deny it anymore.

‘If it’s that rubbish about sending us here, forget it,’ Ron said. ‘It wasn’t your fault that you touched the bloody thing, we were looking for a horcrux for Merlin’s sake. So don’t say you caused all this or killed our families or some bollocks.’

‘It’s about Tom.’

Harry wanted to shut his eyes. When had he became such a coward? Such a *liar?*

At the statement, Hermione’s eyes went wide and her fingers jumped to the ends of her lumpy scarf to pick at a loose thread. Harry watched Ron steadily, who breathed inwards and went still.

‘I know he’s a piece of shit. A psychopath. He’s cruel and he doesn’t care, and he wants to become Voldemort, and he ruined our lives. *Your* lives. And I hate him, a bit, I hate him so much, yet I . . .’

A simple sentence. Why was it so hard?

‘Yet you what, Harry?’

Was there an edge to Hermione’s voice? A hint, a warning: *stop now, stop while you still can.* Or was it only his imagination?

Seconds ticked on. He wished he wasn’t facing them directly and seeing every emotion shining on their faces.

‘You said once that I spend all my time with Tom. That I’ve been fooled, and am deluded the same as the other Slytherins. But I know what he’s like and that makes it worse. He ruined our lives and I — I used to like him. We were *friends* of a sort. Or not friends, but – er —’

Coward.

‘— something.’

‘Something?’ Ron echoed, eyes narrowing, ‘what exactly does that mean?’

Hermione’s face was white. ‘You don’t mean,’ she began, voice higher than usual and starting to wobble, ‘you weren’t in a *relationship* with Riddle, were you? You’re not, now?’

Ron turned to her in astonishment. He looked like he wanted to laugh, and then registered Harry’s expression and stilled.

‘No,’ Harry said, more defensively than he intended to. His cheeks burned —shame? Fear? ‘No, we weren’t in a relationship. You know this is *Tom Riddle,* right?’ His heart was beating so fast they could surely hear it, and there was bile rising in his throat that he forced to stay down.

‘Then what, Harry?’ Ron said quietly. ‘You’re shagging him? Tom fucking Riddle? Is that it?’

Deny, deny, you still have a chance.

‘Not shagging *shagging,’* Harry said weakly, ‘we didn’t have proper sex.’

Silence met his statement. A faint sweat was crawling over Harry's skin and his hands were clammy. But if he lied, he was no better than Tom. And didn't they deserve to not be kept in the dark after everything they had done for him?

'I know I'm a horrible person,' Harry said, 'I know it's sick, I'm sorry.'

'Sick?' Ron repeated. 'He's Voldemort. I mean, he's a murderer, an actual murderer. What sort of twisted —' he shook his head. 'What's actually wrong with you? Do you have something wrong with you?'

He wasn't sure what made him look at Hermione but against his will, Harry's eyes flickered to her and caught her grimace of poorly veiled disgust.

'Harry,' she began, 'I know he's handsome, and charming, of course, but how —how could you —'

'Since when are you gay?' Ron said, his voice rising.

Harry winced. 'I don't know,' he said, 'I don't think —'

'And what about Ginny?' Ron demanded. 'What about my sister? You told her you were going to get back together. I mean I thought you actually liked her. You sure pretended to. Was that all a lie? You like *blokes* now? And him?' He laughed hysterically. 'Tom fucking Riddle,' he said quietly, 'that's what you're attracted to? After everything he's done? Everything he did to *Ginny,* and us, and you?'

Harry's mouth was dry. He had a thousand excuses and reasons and pleas. 'Yes,' he said.

Ron's eyes bugged. 'That's it? That's all you're going to say?'

'Well, what do you want to hear?' Harry said. 'That I'm fucked up in the head? I'm a horrible, messed up person? There's something wrong with me? I *know,* okay?'

They were looking at him as though they had never seen him before, but still it spilt out, still Harry had that deep, rotting urge to confess and lay it all bare. 'And Ginny?' he said hoarsely, 'you have no idea how much I liked her. I loved her. We broke up and we're here now, but that doesn't mean I was pretending. You know nothing about what I felt for her and you can't just say it wasn't real because —'

'You replaced her with Riddle. Do you know what a slap in the face

that is? What a goddamn joke?' Ron's voice had a dangerous edge to it now but Harry didn't interrupt or say anything, only let him shout and every word hit just as Ron intended.

'It's not that he's a boy, Harry,' Hermione said quietly, 'it's because it's him. Out of everyone in Hogwarts . . .' her lips started to wobble, and like Ron, she was struggling to compose her voice.

He had known them for so long that he could read their expressions instinctively. The betrayal he had pictured in his head looked so much worse now, with Ron's face tight, Hermione's twisted into something hurt.

Harry sat there and let them mull it over. It wasn't long before Ron regained his voice and leaned across the table. 'Explain why,' he said. 'Explain exactly what is so great about him? Why you'd do *that*, after everything we've been through. How you can —' his face twisted in clear revulsion and Harry swallowed the lump in his throat.

'I don't know what you want me to say,' he said, 'I liked him, we sometimes got along. It was...'

Effortless.

'He killed your parents!'

'Yeah, I'm aware of that fact. They are *my* parents, after all. And I'm not defending him or anything, but that wasn't exactly Tom, was it?'

'Jesus, Harry!'

Hermione was looking anxiously between them but she said nothing.

'Have you forgotten how he read our minds? That he wants to ruin your life? He doesn't bloody like you, and if you believe he does —'

'I'm not an idiot, Ron.'

'Really?' A laugh bubbled in Ron's throat, harsh and hysteric. 'Only an idiot would have sex with fucking Voldemort.'

'Can you keep your bloody voice down!'

'You started it!'

In the library, the most Ron could manage was a heated whisper but still he was breathing heavily. Harry's insides were twisting; he felt

hot and indignant and sick with self-loathing.

‘Okay,’ Hermione said, and despite the way her voice shook her face was calm. She leaned forward, sweeping a lump of hair behind her ear. ‘So, that was in the past. We always knew you were sort of friends, I suppose. It doesn’t make that much of a difference.’

Ron made an unimpressed noise in the back of his throat but she ignored him. ‘How long was it going on for then? And why didn’t you say anything?’

Harry stared at her. ‘Why didn’t I say anything? Do you know how hard it is to even admit that? And to you — ‘he laughed shakily. ‘Ruin everything we have and let you see me differently? You deserve better than that. Not fucked up Harry Potter and all his issues. I know how messed up it is, how completely sick, and if you think I don’t *care* —’

‘Don’t you dare,’ Ron said. ‘You’re —’ he rubbed a hand over his face, searching for a word that would effectively sum it up. ‘You’re completely fucked in the head.’

‘Maybe it was the killing curse,’ Harry said, ‘that would have to do something to a baby.’

‘So, all this time . . .’ Ron said, his face still dark.

Harry’s heart jumped in his throat. ‘Yeah, basically.’

He didn’t say anything to defend the situation. What would be the point? He had decided to do this and let it out before it ate him up inside. Before he continued to deny it, to fool and trick them, no better than Tom.

Hermione’s lips were white and pursed. ‘So, you feel guilty now? After what he did? After all of it?’

Harry’s insides gave another stab. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘god, do you have any idea what it’s like? I ruined everything. All your lives. I erased your *families!* And don’t say I didn’t, or that it doesn’t matter.’

Hermione opened her mouth and flinched back at his tone.

‘And then Slytherin! And Tom! You should hate me. I *want* you to hate me.’

‘A few more words and we will, mate,’ Ron said quietly.

‘And it’s my fault. So, don’t start anything about me being tricked or naive. I can’t blame my scar. It’s my fault. My complete lack of moral judgement. Just —’

His voice cracked and all the words that had came so easily forsake him. The lump was back in his throat, burning and hot, and something was lodged over his heart, hammering against his rib cage. He left himself entirely at their mercy and now, after laying in all bare, he waited.

‘But it’s over,’ Hermione said. ‘Right?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said, his throat constricting. ‘Yeah, it’s over.’

‘Good, because you’re not dealing with your feelings properly. You’re barely sleeping, you look awful, and if you let Riddle manipulate you when you’re vulnerable –’

‘I’m not vulnerable,’ he snapped, ‘and what do you think I’m going to do, become a Death-Eater? Decide a spot of muggle-killing sounds fun? I’d rather *die* than be anything like him.’

‘No,’ Hermione said coldly, ‘I think you’re going to ruin yourself.’

‘And so what? Everything else is already ruined! There’s nothing left anymore. No Voldemort, no war –’

‘He’s a horrible person!’

‘Maybe I am as well. Ever think about that?’

‘No.’ She shook her head. ‘No, Harry, you . . . ’her face tightened, and realisation dawned upon it. ‘You still like him, don’t you? Even after all of this? *How?*’

‘I don’t,’ he said, ‘I can’t stand him. It’s over, really, it’s –’

She was shaking her head. ‘I don’t know what you want me to say, Harry. Even so, he’s . . .’

‘Planning on starting a war and taking over the world,’ Ron said helpfully. Then he grimaced and half-stood up. ‘I can’t,’ he said, ‘I don’t . . . I mean Merlin, Harry.’

‘Yeah, I know,’ Harry said, ‘I get it.’

Ron stood and in the weak candlelight, he looked as unwell as Harry

felt. ‘I’m sorry, but Riddle? You – with *him*?’

Harry couldn’t say anything now. Everything had drained out of him and he felt entirely exposed. The sheer weight of it – the guilt, the confession – left him raw.

‘Harry, I can’t,’ Ron said. ‘I can’t. Not with that.’ He shook his head, and Hermione, who was still sitting, chewed her lip.

‘I know it’s your life,’ she said, ‘but what about now? After everything we’ve been through?’

He didn’t say anything and she stood up too. ‘Let me just process it, okay? I don’t know how to deal with it, I’m sorry but I don’t. I don’t know how you can like him, how you can hide that for weeks, and even now . . . ‘she waved her wand so her rolls of parchment floated into her bag.

‘I’m an awful person,’ he said, ‘I know.’

‘No, you’re . . .’ she trailed off and lifted her bag.

Harry didn’t say any of the things he wanted to at that moment. All the begging, all the pleas, all the desperate attempts to make it right. He didn’t say how he’d give up Tom, give up all of it, for them. What would be the point? He didn’t *deserve* them to feel bad. So he said nothing.

Hermione gave him another sad, conflicted look but Ron’s face was tight and set. Harry watched as they left the library and began to talk once out of earshot. It was a dizzying sensation, the loss, the acceptance, finally letting it all go. He sat there for a long time, a numbing sense of disbelief growing inside him, and watched the remaining students leave one by one until he was alone.

Chapter End Notes

> Ouch ... I promise next chapter is significantly less stressful, which is surprising because it’s from Tom’s POV. Madness, I know

Stone Serpents

There was something exquisite about it, the slow crumbling of a human being. The very act of destruction in all its ravage glory, and the sweeter, more desperate attempts at salvation. There was something about knowing he had caused it, the slow ruin, the shattering, something glorious.

A smile curved Tom's lips when he watched Harry — his eyes glazed, dull and dead, his hair standing wild in every direction. Wasn't this what he wanted? To have something so alive under his hands—so bright and burning and hot—and snuff it out?

Satisfying though it was, Tom hadn't expected what followed —the clogging, heavy taste of guilt, so strong he caught snatches of it; the feverish dreams, more intense than Tom's own, where he would wake up, heart hammering, unsure where he was or what was going on. He was tired of Harry's nightmares, tired of the way they left him, disorientated, detached, wishing for something that had never existed.

He reminded himself *horcrux* to wipe away the feelings of dread. Reminded himself *Harry* and *soon* to push it away.

Despite this, however, Tom felt a jolt —painful and sharp and cold — ripple through him as he sat in the common room. The feeling seemed to spread inside him, steadily growing and bringing with it a sick, anguished sort of pain.

The entrance of the common room opened and Harry walked in, his head bent, moving in quick, smooth steps. He ignored Abraxas who called him over, ignored Tom despite the fact he was *there,* and made his way briskly to the dormitory.

God, it hurt. As though someone had kicked him in the chest and the dull throb was radiating outwards, bringing pain with every breath.

Tom stood as well, following Harry up the stairs. Opening the door, they came face to face and Tom stilled, eyes wide, wondering, briefly, if Harry had well and truly snapped.

It was only sheer surprise that stopped Harry from saying anything. His face was slack and disbelieving, his eyes shining brightly. A second later they glazed — and oh, to watch that *moment* — and he

stepped forward, jaw tightening.

Wondering was he about to be punched in the face and was it worth it, Ton took a step back. ‘What happened to you?’ he said.

Harry blinked disbelievingly. ‘What is wrong with you?’ he said. ‘God, Tom, for once in your life give it a rest. Stop pretending you care!’ His voice cracked, ruining all the venom in his tone. ‘It’s over. You can’t fix it.’

Tom blinked. ‘Are you hurt?’ he found himself saying. But while Harry was pale and dishevelled, he didn’t look injured in any way. ‘No,’ he continued, ‘it’s something else, isn’t it? Did you fight with Weasley and Granger?’

Harry flinched. ‘It has nothing to do with you. I know you think you’re the centre of the universe but you’re not. If you really think I’m going to just *tell* you— ‘he laughed, somewhat hysterically, moving forward to get to the door.

Tom’s heart jumped in his throat. That pain, that tight, compressing, brilliant pain, was receding. ‘Wait,’ he said and grabbed Harry’s wrist. ‘I can *feel* it.’

Something akin to shock crossed Harry’s face and he snatched his wrist back. ‘You’re such a liar,’ he said. ‘Can you feel how much I hate you as well?’

He was breathing funnily. Sharp and short and the hand that Tom had grasped was trembling. Fumbling in his pocket, Harry found his wand and clutched it until his grip steadied.

Tom watched him, from his wild eyes to his sharp breaths, and felt that lodge of coldness settle more firmly inside. ‘Merlin, Harry,’ he breathed, ‘at least sit down.’

Harry looked at Tom and the door and back again, partaking in some form of mental gymnastics. Tom witnessed the moment he gave up — the moment the fight drained out of him — and he turned away entirely, moving to the nearest bed: Tom’s. Wasn’t that just delightful?

‘Just go,’ Harry said, ‘please just — ‘he rubbed a hand over his face. He was shaking again, odd, jittery, and his breath was quick. ‘*Leave,* Tom.’

Tom had never seen Harry with all his defences down before. It was as

if he no longer cared how he looked or how Tom viewed him. He was half-paying attention, half-staring blankly at the floor. Stepping closer, Tom frowned. He was a sickly, sallow colour, and coated in a light sheen of sweat.

'Harry,' Tom said, and when Harry looked up there was a flash of something hot in his eyes. Tom ignored it, though his insides twisted at the thought of a fight, a *challenge,* and said, 'let me guess. Weasley and Granger found out all the nasty little things you're hiding. Probably about me, and you, and they completely overreacted. In fact, you probably told them yourself.'

'How did you —' he shook his head. Looked down at his legs, and gripped his knees to suppress their shaking.

Because you wouldn't be so riled up if it was anything else. You wouldn't have the same defences, the same anger. Nothing could make you care so much, except them.

'Lucky guess,' Tom said. He had to be careful. Like an injured animal, Harry was one remark away from snapping for good. He was still acting as though he couldn't catch his breath, still wide-eyed and shellshocked, zoned out to everything around him, including Tom.

'As much as I hate them,' Tom said, 'you know, with all their holier-than-thou ways and insistence on following Dumbledore's orders—'

No reaction. Harry was gasping, very quietly, and trembling. Was he witnessing some form of mental breakdown before his eyes? A seizure? The moment where everything finally hit at once?

He would have enjoyed it if Harry would have responded, Tom decided. Instead, he felt uneasy. Out of place. Onlooking without any acknowledgement wasn't sweet like he had imagined. And watching Harry gasp and crumble and wreck himself . . .

It wasn't nice when it wasn't by his hands.

'They're going to get over it,' Tom said and slowly moved over to where Harry sat. 'Weasley and Granger. They're going to forgive you.'

Harry looked up then. 'What do you know?' he said, 'you know nothing about forgiveness, it's practically a joke at this point. And you don't know them or even what happened or —'

'*Harry,'* Tom said. 'Did Weasley and Granger say they hate you? They

never want to see you again? You're as good as dead to them?'

'No, but —'

'They know about us. They're overly dramatic in their surprise, and even if they don't get over it —'

No, that wasn't a good direction to go in. As much as he hated it, Harry loved those two pathetic Gryffindors, valuing them far higher than Tom. He wouldn't react well to the prospect of it not mattering, wouldn't take the idea of forgetting them as anything but an attack.

'What did they say then? They can't look at you? You're not what they thought?'

'They —' he licked his lips. Was he aware that he was practically whispering? He didn't seem aware of very much right then. 'They don't know. Hermione said she doesn't know how to deal with it, she needs time and Ron …' he laughed, a sharp, unhinged sound and Tom wanted to memorise it, to taste it, wanted it to repeat in his mind over and over again.

'Time? That always means she's going to forgive you. They'll probably get over it in a day or two. Really, if Granger says she needs *time* she's practically forgiven you already. And Weasley will always sway to her opinion, won't he?'

'No, he won't, they'll —'

'Harry, *breathe,'* Tom snapped.

Harry fell silent, looking at him incredulously. His eyes were very big and his forehead was damp with sweat.

'You still told them, didn't you?' Tom found himself saying, before Harry's shock could morph into anger. He kept his voice soft and factual, his eyes on Harry's to hold his attention before it slipped away.

'It was nagging on your subconscious, all that guilt and shame. You told them, and you expected them to hate you for it, so much that you can't see any other reaction. You set it up in your head, the destruction of your whole friendship, because that's what you expected. But your stupid Gryffindor friends aren't gone, Harry, so stop imagining the worst.'

Harry was silent for a long minute and Tom waited, listening to his breathing settle and his eyes become clearer. ‘They’re not *stupid,’* Harry said, clearing his throat so his voice was steadier. ‘But . . . thanks.’

What on earth was he meant to say to that? Tom shrugged. ‘I can’t believe you told them,’ he said, ‘you know I wouldn’t have, despite how fun it may have been.’

To see those expressions, righteous and stricken and furious. To hold that power in his hands, to watch them pale in shock, horror . . .

‘Yeah, I don’t think I’ll take your word for it,’ Harry said darkly.

Tom felt almost *fond.* Harry was so suspicious, so strong-willed and defensive. The fact he would wreck his relationship, would let go of the thing that had been stewing inside him for months, just so Tom didn’t have any leverage over him . . .

Tom smiled. ‘Of course,’ he said, ‘I’m evil and all that.’

They were silent for a moment and Harry ran a hand through his hair, pushing it back from his forehead and unconsciously revealing the jagged outline of his scar. It was faint and pink, yet stood out against the rest of his unmarred skin. ‘What did you mean,’ Harry said, absently tracing a hand across the duvet on Tom’s bed, ‘when you said you could feel it?’

The words sent a jolt through him and he forced it not to show. He didn’t like being reminded of how the connection went both ways and the effects it had.

‘It was like — a sense of despair. As though the whole world had collapsed around me. Around *you.’* Tom smirked, forcing his face to stay relaxed. ‘You’re a very dramatic person sometimes.’

‘Alright, *Voldemort.* Did anyone look at you wrong today? Are you planning their murder?’ He grinned, in an unconscious, easy way, and Tom’s insides burned with want.

Harry still looked like a wreck —glazed and exhausted, and oddly vulnerable. Yet he was alive and unshakable and *strong*. There was something about how he would continue to fight that was more satisfying than any destruction by Tom’s hands.

It was addicting, the rush, the challenge, the fact that Harry would

never truly give up no matter what was thrown at him. It was sweeter than any submission, more satisfying than any victory. Harry wouldn't give in, and that, more than anything, was what Tom liked best.

Looking at him then — shadows under his eyes, face sweaty, eyes a feverish fog— Tom felt an insatiable itch burn under his skin. First and fundamentally, he wanted Harry as *his*.

'I should . . .' Harry cleared his throat and seemed to realise where he was. Colour came back to his cheeks and he stood, averting his eyes. 'Anyway . . .'

He smoothed a hand over his robe and gave Tom a fleeting, uneasy look.

'Anyway?' Tom prompted, forcing his voice to stay even, to not reveal any mad, rushing desperation.

'Anyway, I need to go.' And Harry's lips twitched into a smirk—he was such a *bastard* sometimes —and he left the dorm, without a second thought or look back, leaving Tom to bask in the aftertaste.

He should hate him but the interaction was enough to send his blood rushing; it was enough to make the itch under his skin burn, his mind to ignite. Tom did love a challenge, after all, and what was better than watching Harry come back to him, watching him come *willingly?*

He was sure it would happen, so sure that it flooded his brain with a dizzying sort of anticipation.

He couldn't get the image of Harry's wild, panic-stricken face from his mind. Thinking of it brought a flood of possessiveness. To see him like that, with no guard up, completely vulnerable. To see him, as no one else had before . . .

Harry must hate him for it. Must resent him, despise him, defensive and embarrassed.

Though Tom found himself grinning at the thought, he didn't seek Harry out again. He watched him instead — at meals, where he picked at his food and excused himself early; with Abraxas, humming

distractedly, mind elsewhere. He found himself zoning into the dip of his throat, the pale curve of his jaw, the restlessness of his fingers. He'd watch Harry as he gazed over at the Gryffindor table, or stifled a yawn.

And while observing from afar, Tom saw that, despite how longingly he gazed at his friends, how many nights he stumbled out of the dorm, Harry was looking *better.* Sharper, and more awake. Tom had fewer dreams now, less intrusive thoughts of things long gone. Harry was more relaxed, more assured, and yet still so unforgiving.

It was puzzling how much Harry cared. Puzzling, fascinating, and unbearably frustrating.

A few days later, he found Abraxas in one of his many hiding places — an old storeroom deep in the dungeons. Empty classrooms, secret passageways, and abandoned alcoves were all places he retreated to when he was younger, and now Tom pulled open the door, stepping inside to the smell of dust and turpentine.

Abraxas was sitting cross-legged in front of a large, rippling canvas, testing paint swatches on a loose piece of parchment. He scrambled upwards when Tom came in, dusting his hands on his robe and leaving behind purple fingerprints.

'My lord,' he began, clambering over an array of paints and pencils, 'I was working on the Dark Mark, of course, I can show you what I have done if you want. Here, wait —'

Tom shook his head. 'Forget about it,' he said, 'I trust you'll provide something satisfactory.' He turned to the canvas, ignoring the tentative way Abraxas flushed, a pleased smile twisting around his lips. For the first time in seven years, he was unsure as to where Abraxas' loyalties truly lay. What would happen if he had to choose between Tom and Harry?

Before Harry arrived, Abraxas had been the perfect candidate. Eager to please, starved for approval, and pitifully lonely, Tom only had to pay him the slightest bit of attention to ensure unwavering loyalty. Out of all the snivelling house — all the bigots and cowards and pampered, pureblood pets — Abraxas was the most tolerable. He had a quiet intelligence, an easy demeanour, and was independent in a way that suited Tom perfectly.

Tom stared at the canvas, which depicted a small child standing in a grove, fingers outstretched towards a unicorn foal, pink face lit up in

awe. ‘Your attention to detail is fascinating,’ he said, pretending to be bothered by the use of light and dark contrasted in the dusky sky and magical glow. ‘Your mother would like this one. You should tell her.’

He looked surprised and pleased. ‘It’s actually for her,’ Abraxas said, ‘not until it’s finished obviously. Do you really think she will?’

‘Definitely.’ Unlike his father, Abraxas adored Mrs Malfoy, unrightfully so. She had none of the traits Abraxas praised her with; upon Tom’s many meetings, she was a small, timid, critical woman who played the piano poorly and wandered around in a nightdress during the day.

They chatted about the painting for a moment and Abraxas lit up as he talked, arms gesturing, words rushing forward. Tom waited until Abraxas was relaxed and he had fostered a sense of companionship that seemed deeper than the superficial thing it was.

‘So you and Harry,’ he said, stepping back to look around the room, ‘you’ve become close, haven’t you?’

Abraxas stilled. ‘Yes,’ he said, ducking his eyes, ‘I suppose so.’

Tom hummed. ‘Surprising, I must say. He has very different views, doesn’t he? Almost . . . rebellious, if you will.’

Abraxas chewed his lip. ‘I suppose so,’ he said, ‘we don’t talk about that stuff. Do *you* talk about that stuff?’

Tom’s grin stretched. ‘All the time,’ he said, ‘he’s quite charming when he’s vehement.’

‘Yes, well…’ Abraxas looked down at a squashed tube of burnt orange paint. ‘We mostly just play Quidditch and talk about, you know, normal things. Classes, and people, and well, friend stuff.’

Tom’s lips thinned at the remark but Abraxas continued. ‘Just things like that. He’s not as serious as the other Slytherins, and it’s easier, you know? So yeah, we’re friends.’

Tom felt something twist inside him and he had the urge to raise his wand until Abraxas’ babbling faded to thin, pleading whimpers. Because while it was true, Harry being seen by someone else, liked and admired and *known,* made him inexplicably angry.

‘Of course,’ he said. *Perhaps your only friend. ‘*Though it is concerning,

the opposing views he holds. It would be a shame if they ever caused conflict. I'd hate for your—ah—friendship to be damaged.'

'Yeah,' Abraxas said, throat bobbing.

'Rosier's right in a way,' Tom continued, 'Harry doesn't really fit in here. It's alright for now, but I hope he never does anything to question his position in the house. It would be a shame for the issue to arise.'

'I've tried to talk to him,' Abraxas said. 'He doesn't want to listen to anything about pure-bloods, or Slytherin, or making a name for himself.'

'I think he's beyond being swayed,' Tom agreed, 'which could cause . . . problems.'

'Problems?'

'Say Harry's less of a friend and more of a *threat.* I'd hate for you to have to lose him.'

'Oh no,' Abraxas said quickly, 'it's not — he's not going to be a problem, is he? I thought you *liked* Harry.'

Tom waited. Abraxas looked quickly at the ground and up again, and now his face was less nervous and more assured. 'I'll always be a death-eater first,' he said. 'My loyalty always lies with Slytherin and while Harry's my friend . . . 'He chewed his lip. 'The house is my *family*.'

Tom hid his grin. 'I agree,' he said, 'nothing could come between the bonds we fostered here. Being a Slytherin isn't something that can be taught. Being one of us . . . 'He shrugged. 'Harry will never get it. He hasn't grown up in Slytherin since first year or shared any of the memories we have.'

'Exactly,' Abraxas agreed, 'and it's frustrating but I like him anyway. We just disagree on certain things.'

If only it was that easy for him. He could see it now, the broad strokes, the generalisation. *Tom and Harry: we just disagree on certain things — the past, the present and the future.*

'I'm sure we'll have no major issues we can't settle,' Tom said. 'Your beloved friendship won't end over a few conflicting opinions.'

Abraxas' shoulders relaxed and he smiled. Grateful, trusting. Lying? It came down to a choice after all, and there was no reason to take it past the hypothetical. Abraxas had said it, with enough conviction to appear real. He was loyal to *Tom* and in the end? That was all that mattered.

Across the Ancient Runes classroom, Tom's eyes zoned in on Granger. Her frizzy head was bent as she took down notes from the board and beside her a fellow Gryffindor, Lilith Blue, leaned forward to get her attention but Granger didn't notice.

Tom had already finished his notes. He leaned back in his chair, stared at the chestnut top of her head, and burned with the desire to dive into her mind and wade through the knowledge he would find there.

But he would wait. While the knowledge of Voldemort — the knowledge of everything he had once done before — was tempting, Tom was already treading on dangerous ground. He knew how prickly things were, knew, as much as he liked to ignore it, that Harry might not get over it. Harry was stubborn and resilient and already so angry. Tom didn't want to push him over that edge, not now.

'Hey, Tom, what did you get for the second bit? I can't find translations anywhere.'

He absently passed his paper to Lawrence Barfoot on his left (half-blood, son of two potioneers, already forging a pathway into the ministry).

'Thanks. Merlin, you're *finished?'*

Granger was finishing now too. She flexed her fingers, and accidentally leaned her elbow on the freshly drawn runes, smudging them. She didn't notice. Leaning around in her seat, she said something to Lilith (muggleborn, chatty, false hopes of becoming a Healer) and then looked straight at him.

Squirrel-like, Granger froze as their eyes met. Tom arched an eyebrow and she ducked her head, pushing her seat further into her desk with a long screech.

But Tom had patience. The pathway to becoming Voldemort already stretched so far into the future. It required precision, influence, working in the shadows no matter how frustrating it might be. He could suppress the itch until he gained Harry's trust. Then — carefully, meticulously — he would glean the scraps of knowledge until the picture of his future, the picture of *Voldemort*, and *Power*, and *His*, went from a blurry thing to painstakingly sharp.

'Do you know if Professor Slughorn's setting a test?' Charlotte Hornby said. She smiled so the dimples in her cheeks stood out, along with the slight chip to her front tooth. In an exaggerated movement, she twisted in her chair, long blonde ponytail swishing. 'You Slug Club members always get special treatment, don't you?'

'I don't know what you mean,' Tom said, 'but *Slytherins* on the other hand . . .'

She laughed. High, false, grating. He wished to say something cold and see the flash of surprise. Wished, more than anything, to drop the disguise, the sickening, ever-so-charming *act*.

'Well?' she said, 'test or no test?'

'Test,' he said, 'except only revision on everlasting elixirs. He was joking about the other stuff.'

Her face brightened. 'Oh, thank god. See, I *knew* you got special privileges!'

He hummed distractedly. What did Harry expect, for him to *change?* A vow to only make moral decisions? To suddenly develop a conscience?

As the class ended, Professor Appleby set them an essay on rune circles. She was one of the only muggleborn professors, unabashedly so in her sweeping teal skirt and blazer. Tom packed his things slowly — chatted to Charlotte and Lawrence for another few moments — and asked Professor Appleby a question about the new addition of Spellman's Syllabary they were due to get.

A few people lingered behind to listen, one of them being Granger. She never could resist not knowing something and that he could understand.

What he *didn't* expect was for her to come to him when the discussion ended. Her lips were pursed, her eyes downcast, and behind her Lilith Blue was giggling, as though approaching Tom was scandalous.

‘Hermione,’ he said, a smile playing at his lips, ‘it’s been so long since we’ve talked.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘You’re not funny, Riddle,’ she said, ‘and I want you to leave Harry alone.’

‘And why should I do that?’

‘Because you’re *cruel*.’ Like Harry, she was pallid, something she had tried to mask with lipstick. Despair didn’t suit Granger though, wasn’t quite the exquisite, drawn-out struggle that made Harry so captivating. She looked weak and scared and perfectly frail.

'I know you think it’s some sort of game, but it’s not funny, messing him up like that. If you think using him, and manipulating him, just for your own enjoyment is normal — ‘her voice shook in a mixture of anger and fear. ‘He told us, you know. So whatever hold you think you have over him, you’re wrong.’

Despite the way her voice shook, Tom was impressed. Maybe he had underestimated Hermione Granger after all.

‘Told you what?’ he said. It would be sweet to hear, in that revulsed, prissy tone of hers.

‘I know what you’re doing,’ she snapped.

‘Having a conversation?’

‘He’s not a toy. This isn’t a *game.* You can’t pretend you like him, and exploit him when he’s vulnerable —’

He laughed aloud and she flinched.

‘Why do you think I don’t like Harry? Do you really think he’d be alive if I didn’t?’

A threat. Destined to destroy him. Dangerous, unpredictable, knowing too much, seeing all.

‘I don’t think you are capable of it,’ she said. ‘You don’t have one bone in your body that isn’t self-serving. And once you’re finished *liking* him —’

‘Like you are, then?’

She flinched. ‘You don’t know what you’re on about, Riddle. You don’t

even care — you're —'

She wasn't meeting his eyes. As if he couldn't rip through her futile mind whenever he wanted to and take everything she tried to hide. She was *nothing* compared to him.

'What are you saying to him?' she said quietly.

'Just the usual. Corrupting him with my evil ways, making sure he knows how despicable you and Weasley are, how Dumbledore's ideology is deeply flawed—'

'Is this a joke to you? It's not funny, Riddle, it's disgusting. Why are you so obsessed with Harry anyway? Haven't you done enough?'

She was inching away from him a bit, not bothering to look up and meet his gaze.

'So, you're concerned now,' he said, 'that *evil Tom Riddle* is right there when you abandoned him? Isn't that awfully convenient?'

'You're not there for him though and you don't care how Harry is. *You* caused this. '

A flush of pleasure. He saw the concern in her eyes, the desire to ask stopped by her sheer disgust.

'You're right, Hermione. I'll leave Harry alone.'

She froze. 'What?'

'If that's what you want.' He smiled. 'I'll ignore him too.'

Her shoulders shook — hate, she hated him, wasn't that interesting? But Granger regained her composure quickly and now her eyes were cool.

'Leave him alone, Riddle,' she said, nostrils quivering, hair jumping as she stepped back. 'I mean it.'

'What if he seeks *me* out?'

'Well, has he?'

How easy it would be to wind her up. To lie, and have fun, and make her *hate* him so intensely that there was no going back.

He couldn't though, because Harry would never choose Tom over his pathetic friends. It left his mouth sour, jealousy hot and writhing. Harry would always prefer them, always stick to his unwavering morals, his stubborn, Gryffindor ways.

Tom should hate him too.

'No,' he said mildly, 'I haven't spoken to Harry in ages.'

'You're not defending him, are you?'

Suspicion. The tilt of her chin, the frustrating up and down bob of her feet. She wanted to back away from him. Good.

'Why on earth would I be *defending* him?'

Granger could be his way of ensuring Harry's trust completely. Granger could be a bridge; could be the most useful, brilliant tool in his life.

Except Granger would always hate him. Unlike Harry, every interaction would be stained by *fear* — clogging, thick fear, the urge to bolt, to glance away, to never see him as anything but dangerous.

'Keep it that way then,' she said, 'because trust me, being around Harry so much is going to bite you in the face.'

'And why's that?'

'You know what they say about people spending a lot of time together. You want to mess with him but have you ever thought about how he might influence *you?* You'll never have him on your side, Riddle.'

He didn't bother with a retort. Granger was adjusting the leather strap of her satchel and looking at him in a quick movement. She set off down the corridor — brisk, cloud of hair bobbing, footsteps loud.

'You've already lost your friend, Hermione,' Tom said, 'I have what I want.'

Her shoulders hunched. A slight jerk to her stride. But Granger didn't turn around and let him see the words get to her. Another second and she was gone, disappearing around the corner, her little piece said.

Tom dismissed Granger's words immediately. Harry influencing *him* was a ridiculous idea because Tom thought all of Harry's ideas were nonsense.

He had heard morals ever since his days in the orphanage; Mrs Cole reprimanding Dennis before bowls of lumpy grey porridge — *that's a sin, young man.* An arthritic hand banging against the yellowing tablecloth. *The bible says you shouldn't tell lies.*

Drab tartan curtains, a stained shirt that flapped around his hands, and lessons of right and wrong — *don't pull her pigtail, Amy, that's bad, I mean it!*

Watching him as though he was some sort of devil child in the stuffy, peeling office: *don't you feel guilty, Tom? For hurting them like that?* Eyes on the clock hands, the cabbage smell of Mrs Cole's breath, the crushed cigarette butts littering the carpet.

How to put it lightly? He didn't *care.* He never had.

And the way Harry went on — much nicer than Mrs Cole, low and convinced and fervent and sweet — was just as meaningless.

Tom was in the common room, listening to the furious rambles of Lucretia Black —*I hate her! I hate my mother! She's such a fucking bitch* —while Adriana Bulstrode tried to soothe her in low whispers *— I know, but you're of age now, you can leave her if you want.*

A bubbling argument; Bulstrode was so *tactless.*

He let his mind drift to the future and a conversation with Harry came to mind. Harry had said Tom wouldn't get the defence position, which, judging by the confidence in his voice, was something that had happened in his own time.

Would it again?

After all those conversations with Slughorn, all the buttering up to Headmaster Dippet, the stellar string of O's? Would he really be cast aside because of his *age?*

The other Slytherins' voices had faded now. Tom itched to pick Harry's mind or go to Headmaster Dippet's office (Dippet being someone he almost hated as much as Dumbledore). If so, if the hours

and effort were futile, what would he do instead?

Tom stood and the students around him quietened. He ignored this, though it did send a stab of both rage and relish through him, and left the common room.

He had patience. He could wait.

He walked quickly through the dungeons. The library would be too quiet at this time, and he couldn't risk going to the chamber when the halls were still populated.

Instead, he wandered through the winding stone passageways, lit by flickering green torches that cast a weak, gloomy light on the carved benches. Outside the common room, the temperature dropped and the stone muffled all sound except his footsteps.

It didn't matter how long it took, how painstakingly he had to work, he *was* going to become Voldemort. It was practically fate.

Rounding a corner, Tom stopped in his tracks.

Harry was sitting in one of the alcoves, almost entirely obscured from view. The hollowed space was lit only by a single brass lamp, and in its weak glow, Harry was a long silhouette, the top of his hair glowing green. His face was obscured, but he looked up at the sound of footsteps, slowly, almost unbothered, and when they locked eyes he didn't blink.

'Tom,' he said, in a strangely calm voice. 'Decided to hide from those beloved death eaters of yours?'

'Something like that,' Tom said, and as he walked forward — Harry's face flickered in the light now, pale and sharp and striking — the silence between them was strange. 'You?'

Harry looked watchful. Pensive, *odd,* hair rumpled in every direction, sitting with an eerie stillness, so unlike the fidgety behaviour from earlier. 'Headache,' he said.

'Sorry.'

Harry didn't challenge that — only looked at him, a moment too long, too considerate — and breathed out. 'Sit down then,' he said. 'If you want.'

Even that, those words which Tom had craved, which should send surges of triumph through him, came as an afterthought. Unbothered, Harry said nothing as Tom sat down on the bench. He didn't inch away or recoil or even shift, only sat there, expressing no outwards discomfort.

'Do you think Dumbledore ever owls Grindelwald?'

It took him a second to process the words for Harry was looking down at his shoes and the light cast a long green shadow on his jaw.

'No,' Tom said, blinking at the strangeness of it. 'I imagine he said all he needed to when he duelled him, took his wand and got him locked up in his own prison.'

Harry hummed. 'That's what I thought too but I was talking to him earlier and he sounded . . . odd. Wistful and secretive and *sad*.' He shrugged. 'He was withholding something, anyway. It's strange to think that they'll never really get closure. I wonder if he will ever visit him, just to see or explain or ask why. It must be awful, the not-knowing.'

Tom waited to see would he continue but Harry didn't. He was tracing a pattern on the bench with his finger, faded initials that Tom couldn't make out. Then he touched one of the carved snakes that ornamented the sides — small, twisting things, made of smooth stone, their eyes brilliant jewels.

It came alive under his finger, coiling around the digit and flicking its forked tongue. In a quick motion, it lunged for him but Harry hissed, low and unmistakable, and the snake relaxed.

Something inside Tom twisted at the display. Harry rarely spoke parseltongue but now he was doing it without thought, lifting the small stone snake in his hand and hissing to it quietly.

He wasn't even paying attention to Tom yet still he felt it—heat, a dizzying rush of *something,* a sort of breathlessness that struck his whole body.

It should have made him angry. In the past, in his maddening search for family and some sense of connection, being the heir of Slytherin had cemented his place at Hogwarts. It was *his.* Proof. Assurance. After years of searching, of snide mudblood remarks, of not being taken seriously no matter how brilliant he was, parseltongue had defined him.

But watching Harry speak it didn't bring the rage that it should. There was something about the display, about the absent way Harry did it, effortless and unconscious, each word a secret, that felt strangely intimate.

As Harry hissed at the little snake, it watched him in reverence. Its speech back was nonsense — jumbled words, fragments of sentences, *smell, mouse, movement.* The magic in it was slight and already he was pushing the bounds.

Eventually the snake untangled from his hand, coiled itself against the stone slab, and went still.

'They're not very intelligent,' Harry said, 'though Slytherin probably didn't expect anyone to talk to the decorations.'

Tom hummed. 'The bigger ones are more complex,' he said, 'nothing on a real snake, of course, though some in the chamber act much more realistically.'

The faint whispers lingered in his ears, bringing with them a thrill, a snatched remnant of his younger years and the sensation of discovering who he was.

'The basilisk's remarkably intelligent,' he said, 'though most of her thoughts revolve around wanting to eat.'

'I don't fancy waking her up for a chat,' Harry said, 'you know, without the protective eye-gear at least. Maybe a few roosters around to be safe.'

Tom felt a strange wave of affection. Harry was looking at him now, hair falling into his eyes, which glowed with a strange lucidity. It must have been the combined effect of the torchlight flickering ahead but, with the greenish light against his face, Harry's eyes were unnaturally bright.

'She's sleeping anyway,' Tom said. 'After killing Myrtle, I couldn't take the risk of keeping her awake.'

It was one of the things he most regretted about that year. The itchy boredom, the sensation of discovering it all, having it all, had made him reckless. He could still remember that brilliant spike of fear *— school closing, there was a dead girl in the bathroom, oh fuck, oh Merlin. Orphanage. Hagrid. Quick.*

‘Small price to pay,’ Harry said. His voice was slightly bitter and far-off. Tom wondered what he was thinking about, but didn't ask. He was testing the limits, and Harry — strange, thoughtful, watchful — was already too lenient.

He studied him instead. The white hollow of his throat. The sweep of his half-lidded eyes. The dark circles underneath them, deep, purple, like bruises.

His eyes, though, had lost their glassy, unfocused look and there was a clarity to his face. Despite how still he sat, how little he said, Tom thought Harry was more aware of him than he had ever been.

A prickle of unease overcame him. He didn’t want Harry to see him. To know him, in some inexplicable, horrible, real way. Something deeper hung in the air — unspoken, heavy, *everything* — that made Tom feel itchy, scrutinised, exposed.

He shoved the thought away. Harry wasn’t even paying attention to him — if anything, Tom had caught him off-guard in this odd, placid mood.

In an effort to stir the conversation away from the uneasy, unspoken thing that it was, Tom said, ‘have you made up with Granger and Weasley yet?’

Harry blinked at the change, face shifting. He didn’t answer for a moment, and as the seconds ticked on, Tom felt like he was holding his breath.

‘No,’ Harry said, his voice revealing nothing. ‘They still hate my guts. Fair enough, really.’

Tom said nothing and Harry — maddeningly — didn’t either. A minute passed before he looked up again (Tom could do this all day, the wait, the mere act of watching) and chewed his bottom lip.

‘Do you think you could ever stop lying to me? If you really tried?’

He froze. He froze but Harry was expecting that — was all intense, all-knowing, able to jolt him like no other.

Tom bit back the first thing that came to mind: a convincing, fervent, desperate sort of *yes.* And then the truth —*no, no, why would I do that?*

Heard Granger’s factual tone: *I don’t think you are capable of it.*

Saw Harry's all-knowing eyes, brilliant and horrible in their hatred.

'Maybe,' Tom said, gauging Harry's face carefully. Blank. Impossible to read. 'I could try.'

Harry shifted a little bit but if it was a test, Tom had no idea if he passed. He was left with a strange taste in his mouth, an expectancy that Harry had chosen to ignore. Harry just looked at him — a beat too long, too serious — and then back at his knees, saying nothing at all.

Heated

Chapter Notes

> I am so sorry I uploaded the wrong chapter beforehand, I have no clue how it happened. Apologies!

Despite the aftermath, something about telling Ron and Hermione was freeing. A weight had left Harry's chest and everything felt a little lighter. His mind was clear. Steady. And he knew it now, no more denial, no more lies, but with a certainty lodged deep inside. While the past was heavy and impossible to fully escape, it no longer consumed him.

The future was not something to agonise over. He couldn't spend his life waiting for the pieces to slot back into place; spend his days and years in tortured anticipation of something that was *gone*.

As the week passed, Harry got wrapped up in schoolwork. The fervour of the Quidditch team was contagious, and as the days passed, the pain of thinking back began to dull. His nightmares came less frequently, and while he sometimes woke gasping, the aftereffects didn't linger through the day.

It was fine. It was *better*. It was —

'Harry?'

Looking up from his textbooks, Harry waved Belinda over. The library was quiet for the evening and winter sunlight streamed through the large windows.

She sat across from him, fingers lightly tapping the desk. 'You missed a meeting in the common room,' she said.

'Oh? Anything interesting?'

'Slughorn's having a party of sorts. You know, one of those celebrations he throws. He was telling us the guest list.'

'I said anything *interesting.'*

She smirked. 'Apparently, he's generous enough to invite all the Slytherins this time. So kind that he's made it mandatory.'

‘No,’ Harry said, eyebrows raising. ‘Really?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Great. Perfect time to get a case of something contagious. What do you think, spattergroit?’

‘Might be hard to fake.’

He waved a hand. ‘I’ll manage. I’ll get detention or something then.’

She shook her head. ‘From whom exactly?’

‘Dumbledore. I’m sure he’d understand.’

‘Of course,’ she said, ‘I forgot about your dear friend, *Professor Dumbledore.* Tom will hate that.’

She stilled as though she regretted the words but Harry only shrugged.

‘Yeah,’ he agreed, lips flickering upwards, ‘that’s always a bonus.’

It had been a while since they had spoken and something under Harry’s skin itched. It stewed and simmered, sparking with every look they shared, every brush of contact.

The anger had dulled. Seeing Tom brought back a snatch of *something,* but the hatred that had risen was no longer so strong. It felt different. Expectant. Tense.

As though they were both holding their breaths, and one false move would tip everything over the edge.

When he went back to the Common Room, it was to hushed murmurs of excitement. The Slytherin common room was never the loud, clamorous thing the Gryffindor one had been. Even in the heights of excitement, there was an air of composure and reservation.

This was something Harry liked and disliked in equal measure. Now it was strangely peaceful to go inside and know the hush was constant.

He scanned the room out of instinct. Abraxas was sitting at one of the

round tables, hands waving as he talked. His white-blonde head gleamed in the torchlight, and beside him —smiling in an absent, distracted way — sat Tom.

‘Hello, Harry,’ Abraxas said, eyes flickering between Harry and Tom. His hands stilled. ‘Did you hear the news?’

‘About the Slug Club?’ Harry sat down. ‘I know, it’s great. My favourite professor, favourite group of Death Eaters, favourite place to *be* . . . ‘

Tom said nothing. His attention had snapped to Harry at once, and he was watching him in a sharp, careful way.

Harry felt the burn of his gaze and ignored it.

‘He’s inviting Thalia Flume,’ Abraxas said. ‘You know Flume, right? The artist?’

‘Vividly,’ Harry said, who had written a dozen essays on her for History of Magic in fourth-year. ‘That’s great.’

He leaned against the leather sofa and Abraxas gave him a fleeting look.

‘We were just talking about . . .'Abraxas glanced at Tom. Hesitated.

‘New plans to take over the world?’ Harry said. ‘Your cult? The Dark Mark?’

Abraxas laughed nervously but Harry was looking straight at Tom.

‘Yes, kind of . . . 'Abraxas gave Harry a pleading look. ‘Can I . . . I need to — ‘He jerked his hand vaguely and Harry nodded.

‘Go ahead,’ he said, ‘I’ll see you later.’

Abraxas breathed out and, while awkwardly saying goodbye to Tom, hurried away.

When he left Harry leaned back in his seat and forced his body to relax. ‘I think you were scaring him,’ he said casually.

‘Me?’ Tom raised an eyebrow. ‘We were having quite the conversation until you arrived.’

‘Oh, I bet. You looked very animated.’

‘Yes, well, you know how he likes to ramble on.’

Tom’s hand was resting absently on the arm of the chair and the gaunt ring gleamed on his finger. Harry looked at it, let all the implications sink in, and waited.

The air between them was thick. Tom’s head was slightly tilted and his eyes were dark and watchful. He was looking at Harry, as though he would be content to do just that, but Harry only stared back, unwilling to betray anything.

‘We *were* talking about the Death Eaters,’ Tom said finally.

Harry smirked at his small win. ‘No surprise there.’

‘Yes, well it’s a pretty set idea as you already know.’

‘Probably more than you do,’ Harry said, but Tom didn’t take to the remark as he hoped. While his face tightened ever so slightly, he only hummed.

‘Do you want to share that knowledge then? Of all my horrible failures and Dumbledore’s attempts at stopping me?’

‘No thanks,’ Harry said. ‘It’s like you said — that’s all in the *past.* There’s no need to bring it up, right?’

Tom did smile this time and it was a wicked thing. ‘Things may play out the same way, with or without you holding onto your knowledge.’

‘Maybe,’ Harry agreed. ‘I think I’ll hold onto it anyway though. You know, for memories and all that.’

‘Of course you will.’ If he was irritated, it was masked. Tom only looked appreciative, interested, as though the hint of danger in the air excited him too.

It had been so long since they had spoken but it felt as familiar as ever. As tense and quick; as easy and right.

‘I do have one question though,’ Tom said. ‘How many horcruxes did I make?’

Harry smiled. ‘You mean did you get your perfect seven?’

‘Yes.’

‘Cut up your soul so many times you were barely human?’

Tom just waited and Harry shrugged. ‘I think you should be careful what you wish for,’ he said, ‘that’s all.’

‘What a nice way of avoiding the question,’ Tom said. ‘I’m just going to take that as a yes.’

‘Do whatever you want but I’m not telling you. What happened, the future — or whatever you want to call it — is *mine.* So if that’s all you want . . . ‘He trailed off meaningfully.

‘Harry, dear, is that really what you think?’ The words came out sweet and easy, with just the slightest edge. ‘I think this whole argument’s ridiculous. So I found out what you were hiding. The time line’s gone anyway. And all that hope you were holding onto — ‘he shrugged. ‘It’s not my fault it fell apart.’

‘You don’t understand,’ Harry said, his voice quiet and steady. ‘That’s what makes it worse. You don’t *care.* You just think you can use people for your own convenience and it will all work out. You read Ron and Hermione’s *minds* and lied to me the whole time.’

‘Yeah,’ Tom agreed. ‘Though you were hiding something and you *knew* I wanted to find out. You just didn’t want to face the fact it might come true.’

His expression was more open now — and beneath the coaxing tone was something dark and frustrated. Harry’s breath hitched even as he said nothing.

‘You’ve always known, Harry, but it was just easier to deny it. To *wait* and *hope* that you could continue lying to yourself.’

Harry’s fingers flittered against the leather chair arm but his face was blank. He just looked at Tom, swallowing down any defence that rose forward.

Tom paused and then said, very quietly, ‘did you really expect it to go differently?’

The words rested in the air between them, hanging there, expectant, and for a moment neither of them spoke.

‘So I was denying it to myself,’ Harry said, ‘can you blame me? After everything you’ve done — ‘he paused and his voice was cold. ‘I want

you to stop interfering in my life. Meddling, *manipulating.* And Ron and Hermione, if you mess with them — '

Tom's face was impassive and dark and revealing absolutely nothing.

'—you're dead.'

Tom paused, perhaps at the firmness of his tone, or the conviction on his face. 'I don't care about your pathetic friends. If they can even be called that anymore.'

Harry's eyes narrowed. 'You mean *nothing* to me compared to them, Tom.'

'How crushing. And what of my dreams? Do you really think you mean anything when it comes to my plans?'

Something about the quietness made everything tenser. Tom's words were sharp and cold, but Harry wasn't surprised. He had expected it; needed the confirmation, nevertheless.

'Guess we're in agreement then,' he said wryly.

'Quite. Which begs the question — what are you going to do now?'

He raised his eyebrows meaningfully and Harry shook his head.

'What am I going to do now?' he repeated. And despite the tension of the situation, the seriousness, a little smile hovered over his lips. 'I'm going to go and talk to Abraxas. After all, you scared him away.'

Tom's eyes darkened and Harry felt a thrill shoot through him.

'Your insistence to be stubborn isn't as charming as you think,' Tom said.

'Isn't it?' Harry raised an eyebrow. 'What a shame to be you then.'

And as Tom's face hardened — as he watched him cross the room, practically simmering in his quiet anger — Harry's breath quickened.

It wasn't so much a game but a series of increasingly tense encounters.

Harry relished in the frustration on Tom's face, simmering and festering steadily. It was satisfying to finally have the upper hand and draw it out, all spiralling tension and mistrust.

Their interaction was still going through his mind the next day in the Great Hall. Watching Tom's tense manner at dinner gave Harry a stab of pleasure. After everything, did Tom really think Harry would come to *him*?

Across the table, he met Tom's eyes, a smirk quirking his lips. Tom stared back unblinking, face hard. Alphard was reaching across the table for potatoes and his arm knocked Harry's, who slid his eyes away, ending their silent conversation.

He could pretend it didn't bother him, the waiting, the frustration, the want. And Tom . . .

Tom would hate that more than anything else.

Harry's grin slipped when he looked at the Gryffindor Table where Ron was picking absently at his food, head bent. Hermione, however, glanced up and caught his eye.

She jerked her eyes towards the door and then looked back at her plate.

Harry waited a few minutes wondering if he had imagined it. Then, excusing himself, he walked from the hall.

She appeared moments later. 'Harry,' Hermione said, 'good, I thought you might not . . . never mind.'

Harry felt an old familiar ache as they stood there. It had been so long since they had spoken and yet the memory flashed vividly by. He cleared his throat and smiled awkwardly.

'How are you?' he said, when they stood around for a moment, listening to the voices drift from the Hall.

Hermione took a deep breath and stuffed her hands in her pockets. 'Better. I mean, well, *better's* a funny word but I'm coming to terms with it now. The fact we're stuck here.'

'That's good. And Ron?'

Her face tightened. 'You proved to be a good distraction for him,

ironically enough. He's so fuelled on being angry at you that it's providing a distraction from the other things.'

'Well, I'm happy to help. If hating me takes his mind off it . . . great.'

'He doesn't *hate* you.' She stopped and Harry shook his head.

'It's fine, Hermione, really. I don't blame him. Or you.'

She bit her lip. 'I wanted to talk to you about Riddle, actually.'

Harry tensed. 'Oh?' he said carefully. 'What about him?'

'Well, I'm not going to even try to pretend I understand the situation. Frankly, it's disturbing and weird but it's also *you.* You're my best friend and I don't want to cast you aside but . . .'

Her face twisted. She was looking at him, as though trying to convey something of great importance and Harry's heart jumped into his throat.

'I just don't know what to say,' Hermione said finally.

A couple of younger Ravenclaws came out of the Hall, laughing loudly. They didn't spare Harry or Hermione a glance as they passed but still he waited until they rounded the corner.

'You don't have to say anything. I know it's not easy and really, you don't have to — 'swallow. A certainty in his chest, lodged deep— 'you don't have to get over it. Or pretend for my sake, because I get it.'

'I don't want to fight with you. Not when we're in different houses and already don't see each other half as much anymore. You and Ron are all I've got now.' She looked at him earnestly. 'I can't be your friend yet though, Harry. I can't . . . '

'Hermione, you have no reason to feel bad.' He said it quickly, firmly, no bitterness in his tone.

In truth, her words had allowed something strange and giddy to surge inside him: a small, faint hope, so wonderful that his breath quickened.

'I'm fine. Honestly.'

She tilted her head sceptically. 'You do look a bit better. Are you taking those sleeping draughts?'

He shook his head. ‘It’s different now. Being here, all of it. It feels more real.’

That wasn’t mentioning the sheer weight which had disappeared from his chest and the awful, freeing rush that was admittance, both to himself and them.

‘Anyway, what did you want to say? About Riddle.’

She hesitated at the words, as though both of them were going to find it unpleasant. ‘Well, it’s more — Voldemort. And how close he is to becoming *that*. I realise I don’t know much about him. Apart from the whole Myrtle situation and what you told me from the pensieve.’

‘Well . . .’

What was there to say? That Tom was different? More complex? Underneath it all, showed a glimpse of humanity?

‘He’s pretty awful, actually. Slightly saner, and the murder thing is more of a passive trait right now, though that probably won’t last. And obviously, he isn’t set on killing me. Well, *maybe*.’

She shook her head and smiled despite it. ‘You’re mental. But seriously though, do you think there’s any way things could change? I know it’s a stretch — ‘

Harry grimaced. As much as he wanted to defend Tom, to justify it, to somehow gain Hermione back, he couldn’t.

‘Not really,’ he said. ‘Things will go *differently*, I’m sure, but Tom’s pretty set on this whole dark lord thing. I’m not going to lie and say he’s different. He’s pretty much as bad as you think.’

‘That’s — ‘she blew out a breath. ‘At least you’re *aware*, I suppose. Though I admit, when I was speaking to him, it seemed like he *thought* he cared about you, at least. I know it sounds silly . . . ‘

Harry stiffened. ‘You were talking to Tom?’ he said. ‘When?’

‘A week ago, in Ancient Runes. And it’s sort of why I wanted to talk to you now because he was saying the most awful things about how we so *conveniently* abandoned you, as though he would use it right back as a manipulation tactic. And, well — I just don’t want you to think it’s true.’

‘Trust me, Hermione,’ Harry said grimly, ‘I know what he’s like.’

His breath quickened at the thought of them talking. Of stubborn, righteous Hermione and awful, slippery Tom. His insides burned at the thought of Tom taunting her; Tom goading and wicked, a smile playing on his lips.

‘I suppose you do. And it’s different now. And I still think it’s horrible but — promise me you’ll be okay? With him, and this, and all of it?’

‘We haven’t murdered each other yet,’ Harry said. ‘I’m optimistic at the odds.’

‘*Harry.’*

He shrugged. ‘I can handle it, Hermione. Don’t worry about me.’

There was an awkward moment — a moment where neither of them had anything else to say and he wanted to reach out, apologise, do anything to ease the horrible ache that has festered inside. Instead, he tried to smile at her reassuringly, and not let anything else show.

‘I’ll see you around then, I suppose,’ Harry said.

‘Yeah . . . ‘

She glanced away as though she couldn’t look at him. Harry took the second to push all his feelings deep down and try not to make this any worse than it was.

‘Thanks, Hermione,’ he said quietly, ‘for checking up on me.’

She swallowed. ‘Of course, Harry. Sorry we can’t . . . ‘

A vague hand gesture. Many students were flocking from the Hall now and the pause in their conversation was masked.

Hermione shifted on the spot and then gave him a firmer look. ‘Well, bye,’ she said, chewing on her bottom lip.

Harry tried to smile weakly. ‘Bye,’ he said, hoping his face wasn’t as pained as he felt.

A moment later Hermione’s resolve deepened and as she went to find Ron in the Great Hall, Harry tried not to watch her disappear.

He forced himself to stay busy and not focus on the sting of the interaction. Breathing deeply, Harry went through the motions of the day.

Ron and Hermione — despite the hollow ache that had been left in their place — were no longer in the dark. They could make their own choices, and whatever they were, he would find a way to deal with them. He *had* to.

The rest of the day went slowly. After playing chess with Abraxas (not thinking about Ron and his chipped pieces, fiercely loyal with a generation of passed down tricks) and then Quidditch (November sleet, the wind carrying the quaffle over the gleaming black lake, *Ron*, Ron, so intense it felt like a toothache) Harry basked in the warmth of the common room.

Sitting with Abraxas and Belinda beside the dying fire, his eyes grew heavy. Harry flexed his fingers and focused on an ink stain on the floor. It was spreading, black and fresh, into the frayed green carpet.

A jolt and Harry sat up, immediately attentive. A stab of pain flared through his head, brilliantly intense.

‘Are you okay?’ Abraxas said, but Harry was gritting his teeth and could only wave vaguely as reassurance.

His whole head felt like it was on fire — fierce, white-hot, and he clamped down on his lips to not gasp.

At the same moment the entrance opened and Tom walked through. There was something about him then, from the careful blankness of his face to the brisk way he moved, that made everyone still. He seemed to radiate a wave of quiet fury, just below the surface and barely contained.

A hush fell in the room as he passed.

Harry bit down hard on his bottom lip and felt very much like he was being burned with a hot poker. The illusion shattered and he clasped a hand over his scar.

‘Are you okay?’ Abraxas said again, much quieter this time.

Harry nodded jerkily and then groaned. ‘Tom,’ he managed to say. ‘Headache.’

‘*Tom’s* giving you a headache?’

‘Yeah. I mean, look at him — can you blame me?’ He stood up and the world darkened. As another wave of pain rippled through his head, with it came fresh anger.

Just who did Tom think he was? Interfering with his friends, his life, the entirety of Hogwarts?

Tom had ruined his *life.*

‘Where are you going?’ Belinda said. ‘He looked furious.’

‘Good,’ Harry said, striding across the floor. ‘Because I am too.’

The pain in his head was blinding now and he hated Tom with a sort of brilliance. Hated the way they danced around each other in tension that was thick and excruciating; hated how remorseless he was, how cold and unbothered. How they were tied to each other even now and how everything had fallen apart.

Up the stairs, and across the hall, he pulled the door open.

There was a stunned sort of silence. Tom was halfway across the dorm and stopped pacing, his expression dark and incredulous. ‘*What,’* he began, words quiet and flat and deadly, ‘do you want?’

‘What do I want?’ Harry laughed disbelievingly, another spike of pain flaring through his head. ‘You’re such a *dick*, Tom. Such an entitled, nosy, self-obsessed dick.’

Tom’s eyes went dark at the words and when he spoke his voice was cold. ‘I forgot that you’re such a saint. And so *particular*. You say I want everyone to bend to my whims but you? You’re so much worse, Harry.’

‘Funny, I don’t see my *cult* of followers anywhere in sight, do you? God, you’re so deluded.’

‘I’m deluded? You’re under the misconception that you can have all the things you want. Your utopian wizarding world with Dumbledore and every disgusting muggle there is. *Me*, appeasing your stupid ideas, giving up on my plans, my life, as if that will ever happen.’

He had crossed the dorm now and his eyes glittered. Among the brown were small flecks of scarlet, glowing brightly.

'I'm not something you can keep on a leash,' Tom hissed. 'You want control just as much as I do. Perfect Harry Potter, unable to get over the past or accept the situation. This is *it.'*

*'*Well, why should I?' Harry said. 'And you know what, Tom? Fuck you. You ruined my *life.* You're obsessed with interfering in it. You can't leave anything alone. Even with Hermione — '

They were breathing inches apart and Harry's fingers were brushing over the wood of his wand, poking out of his robe pocket.

'Hermione?' Tom said. 'I'll have you know that she came to *me.'*

'But you just couldn't resist, could you? A jab, a taunt, a threat —you always have to have the upper hand.'

'You're the exact same. If you weren't so stubborn — 'There was an edge of frustration to Tom's tone, more apparent now. 'Are you ever going to get over it? Your time line's gone. *Big deal.'*

'You make it just so *easy* to hate you, I don't even have to try anymore. One sentence and I'm reminded of exactly what you are.'

'And have you ever thought,' Tom said, in a much lower voice, 'that I hate you too? That you're every bit as ridiculous, as insufferable, as downright infuriating, as you claim I am? I should *kill* you.*'*

'Try it then,' Harry said, raising his eyebrows. 'Oh, wait, you already *have.'*

They glared at each other. Blood was surging through Harry's ears and the adrenaline rush had wiped away the pain in his head. He looked at Tom—all scarlet-flecked eyes and trembling anger, so bright and vicious and alive that it was jarring. He had run his hands through his hair before Harry had arrived, and it stood at awkward angles.

'You think you're so manipulative,' Harry said. 'So clever and charming and that everything will work out for you. You're a *fool.'*

'It will work out,' Tom breathed, convinced, fervent, not breaking eye-contact. 'Everything you know is gone. You know nothing of my plans, Harry, not anymore.'

‘Really?’ Harry licked his lips. They were barely inches apart and he could feel the heat of Tom’s breath. Lowering his voice, he said, ‘you went to see Slughorn asking about the Defence position, didn’t you? Tell me, how’s *that* plan going for you?’

He knew he had guessed correctly by the way Tom stiffened.

Smiling coldly, Harry went on. ‘Such a *shame*, isn’t it, to have something snatched away from you like that.’

Tom’s face darkened and for one breathless moment, Harry stilled. His wand was still in his pocket and they were staring at each other in anger. In frustration and tension so thick and pent-up, blood humming in his ear, insides hot and writhing—

And then Tom surged forward and kissed him.

His lips were warm and insistent and so crushing that it hurt. Their teeth knocked together and Tom yanked him forward, a frustrated noise rising in his throat.

Harry shoved him away and gasped. ‘You’re such a prick,’ he said, and shoved Tom once again for good measure. As his hands made contact with Tom’s chest, he felt that same burn; that cocktail of loathing and desire which made his head spin.

His fingers were still fisted in the material and his lips seared from where they had made contact with Tom’s. ‘Why do you have to be such a prick *all the time?’*

Tom’s eyes were darker now and it was the trace of anger shining there that made Harry’s breath catch. Not the unmasked want that he was sure reflected on his own face, but the frustration, raw and apparent and so palpable it seemed to radiate around them in thick, shimmering waves.

‘Are you finished giving your little lecture?’ Tom said. ‘Because I’m so *sick* of your righteous morals. You’re such a child — ‘

Harry raised his hand to punch him and found himself yanking Tom forward by his collar. The kiss was no less intense than the previous one — if anything it was meaner. He had Tom’s chin in a bruising grip, and Tom’s fingers were pulling at his hair, drawing him even closer as if he couldn’t stand the fraction between them.

They kissed frantically, all tongue and teeth and painful, gripping

fingers. Harry gasped against Tom's mouth when it parted, and immediately bit down hard on his bottom lip.

Hissing, Tom yanked a piece of his hair so hard that Harry winced and bit him again.

'You're infuriating,' Tom said, right against his lips. 'Do you have any idea — '

He groaned when Harry kissed him again. Fingers making deft work of Harry's tie, Tom tossed it carelessly away.

'You're so manipulative,' Harry breathed, pulling back. 'So self-absorbed, so interfering. You can't even help it, can you? You're just a *dick*.'

'And what are you going to do about it? Continue to play this stupid avoidance game and pretend that things will magically fix themselves?'

He pulled Harry's head back so his lips were against his throat. 'You just can't face the fact you want to give in.'

He didn't bite down like Harry thought he would but hovered there, lips against his pulse, which immediately spiked.

'Shut up, Tom,' Harry hissed. 'Do you ever give it a rest?' He shoved him backwards and his legs hit against the nearest bed.

As Tom glared at him, rumpled, furious, Harry's insides flooded with heat. It was a burning, insatiable thing — all frustration and anger and *weeks* of snide remarks and suffocating tension.

'Shit,' Harry said, swiftly making work of his robe. 'Do you want to — '

'Fuck?' Tom's smile was a sinful thing. 'Is that *really* a question?'

Closing the distance between them, Harry kissed him again. He couldn't help himself — kissing Tom was like a drug. It was better than any drug, more intoxicating, more consuming, and he could get lost in it, do it forever . . .

He pulled back and they stared at each other. Tom looked a *mess.* Lips reddened, hair mussed, robes halfway unbuttoned.

'The dorm,' Harry said, and almost groaned at the thought. 'It's nearly

curfew and it doesn't lock.'

'Doesn't it?' And then — with a rather proud looking smile — Tom murmured in parseltongue and the door very definitely clicked.

'How convenient,' Harry said dryly, eyes on the way the handle had changed into the brass face of a snake. Tom's hands were absently pressed against the skin of Harry's chest as though he couldn't help himself.

'But still,' Harry continued, thoughts slipping at the sensation, 'what if someone wants to go to bed?'

'Do you honestly think I *care?'* Tom looked so indignant — so offended — that Harry laughed, rather dizzily, at the prospect of Tom locking the others out of the dorm.

'Tom,' he began and reached out to touch his face. Except that was too tender, too *sweet,* and after a second, he tightened those fingers in his dark hair instead. 'That sounds like an absolutely awful idea.'

'Yeah,' Tom agreed, 'the worst.' His fingers were still splayed over Harry's chest, warm and firm, and they were so close that Harry could feel the press of his body against his own.

He rolled his hips experimentally and Tom made a hitched noise that went straight to Harry's gut.

'I still think you're an utter dick,' Harry breathed, groaning at the sensation. 'And you should suffer. You should have your life *ruined*. You will. You — 'He muffled the next noise against Tom's mouth, half-forgetting what they were arguing about, knowing nothing mattered except this.

It came to him, the choice, clearer than ever, stripped of anything but the reality. The awful, agonising choice that had never really seemed like a choice at all but an admittance. A release of something he kept buried inside, and frustrating, horrible, lovely Tom —

Wasn't it only the same for him?

There was a sense of urgency in their movements, a franticness that bordered on painful. Harry's skin felt like it was burning and yet he couldn't pull away. There was only *Tom* and that sinful rush of sensation as their hips rolled together and they gasped against each other's mouths. Only Tom and the sharp, crushing press of his lips, the

way his fingers were so tight they hurt.

It was with a sort of savagery that they fumbled with uniforms, tossing them aside.

'*Harry*,' Tom murmured, very quietly against his neck, and Harry shoved him so they fell on the bed.

Laughing in a sharp, delighted way, Tom grabbed Harry's wrist to pin him down.

'You're such a *dick,*' Harry said, prising his fingers off. They were half-sitting on the bed, and Harry leaned over him, breathing heavily.

Tom was leaning against the headboard, watching him with slightly glassy eyes. His cheekbones were flushed a pale pink and his eyes were bright. Harry had forgotten what his face was like this close, from the delicate curve of his mouth to the dark slant of his eyelashes, and he felt rather winded.

'Are you still mad?' Tom said, in such a sly, goading tone that Harry's anger came rushing back at once.

'*Yes,'* he breathed and reached forward to wrap his fingers around Tom's pale, lovely neck, who stilled at once.

There was a heartbeat of silence where Harry felt Tom's pulse jump under his skin, quick and stuttering. Despite how he smoothed out his face, how relaxed he appeared, there was something careful in Tom's eyes — guarded and uncertain, unable to be fully masked.

It felt like power in Harry's hands, though it wasn't, of course. Even with his fingers wrapped around Tom's neck — even feeling the skin there, all blood and veins and heartbeat and heat — it could so instantly turn. There was a thrill in that, a spike which came with the unpredictability.

Harry felt like he was holding his breath and was one move away from real danger.

It was a heady sensation — the knowledge, the anticipation, the fact that right now he was in control — and his heart quickened as Tom's lips curved into a lazy smile.

'Harry, dear,' he said, and Harry swore he sounded almost *pleased.* 'Just what do you think you're doing?'

A threat and a promise in one. Harry didn't release the hold on his throat but leaned forward so his lips were brushing Tom's ear.

'I thought you liked *games,'* he murmured. 'But that's only when you're in control, right?'

Fingers tightened around his back, light, warningly, and Harry smiled.

'You can't stand it,' he breathed. 'Y*ou,* great Tom Riddle, losing control.'

Tom pulled Harry back so they were looking at each other.

'Try it,' Tom said, voice dark and foreboding. It had an almost mocking lilt to it all the same, and his mouth was curved lazily upwards. 'I *dare* you.'

Under Harry's fingers, his pulse steadied, even when Harry pressed down. There was a second where Harry held his breath, unwilling to look away.

Then Tom's fingers rose — nonchalant, as though it was an afterthought — and removed Harry's from around his throat.

A surge shot through Harry — triumph, heady and sweet — and he realised he was half-straddling Tom, who cupped the back of his head and brought it forward to meet his. Tom didn't quite kiss him but lingered there, lips parted, so they were breathing an inch apart.

Harry's head swam at the sensation. Light, dizzy, maddeningly intense.

Tom was lightly stroking Harry's bottom lip, the pad of his finger pressing against teeth and into the wet heat of his mouth. His eyes were half-lidded now, relaxed, curious.

Harry eyelids fluttered and he leaned his forehead against Tom's. A flush had crept over his skin, hot, feverish, and when Tom's other hand reached down to touch him, he groaned.

'*Yeah,'* Harry breathed, cock jumping as Tom wrapped it in a loose grip. His breathing hitched. The light, teasing touch of Tom's fist was already unbearably good. It was almost *unfair* how right it felt, only a light brush of contact, but he leaned into Tom anyway, helpless.

‘Do you want to have sex?’ Tom said, stroking Harry off all the while. His voice was rougher now, and the words made Harry pause.

‘You mean, can you *fuck* me?’ He said it slowly, bluntly, and gasped when Tom thumbed over the head of his cock.

‘Yes.’

Harry hesitated. The sensation of Tom jerking him off was exquisite, all pleasure and friction and long, precise strokes, and the image of it was even better. ‘Well, why can’t I fuck *you?’*

Tom actually laughed. ‘You’re hilarious,’ he said and right against the shell of his ear — ‘*No.’*

*‘*Then no,’ Harry said, hips jerking into Tom’s hand. ‘Have you forgotten how much I despise you? Or *everything?’*

*‘*It was worth a try.’ Tom kissed him, perhaps to shut off his next remark, all open-mouthed and demanding. His teeth nipped down on Harry’s lip in a way that was so much more frantic, sharp and insistent and heated.

Without breaking the kiss, Harry moved so they lay side by side in a less awkward position. He traced a finger down Tom’s stomach, rather wonderingly, and then over his hip bone and finally to his cock.

They were facing each other, foreheads practically pressed, and the bed was small and rickety and creaking with every movement. Rather than look into Tom’s eyes, all bright and sharp and foggy with desire, Harry closed his own, giving into the sensation. Tom’s fist tightened around him, pressure increasing, and Harry moaned against his mouth, arching forward —

Abruptly it cut off.

‘What *now?’* Harry said, giving Tom a withering look and barely suppressing a whine.

‘Nothing,’ Tom breathed, a beat too late. ‘Sorry. Habit.’

‘*Habit?’* Harry repeated and couldn’t help laughing. ‘God, you’re so sadistic.*’*

Tom’s lips quirked and he gave Harry’s cock a few leisurely strokes.

‘Tom,’ Harry said, breath catching at the agonising pace. His fingers

tightening warningly over Tom's cock who didn't appear to notice — or care.

'You're so impatient,' Tom murmured, tilting Harry's head back to mouth around his jaw. His teeth were sharp and barely leaving a mark — a hint, an edge, a dangerous thrill — and Harry pressed forward against the heat of his body.

'I really don't think you should — *ah* — test me right now.' Harry loosened his grip on Tom's cock, fingers almost slack, but Tom was only staring at him, bright, sharp, as though he wanted to memorise Harry's expression.

'Is that a threat?' Tom said, words hot against Harry's throat, eyes glassy with emotion.

It was thrilling to watch Tom look so raw; all his coldness shattering and his face overtaken with something desperate, dark and heated and intense.

Harry raked a nail against Tom's cock and said, '*yes.*'

They were kissing again, angrily. Harry made a low noise in his throat when Tom's fingers scratched over his scalp, and a deeper one when he decided to stop playing around.

It was torture of the very best kind - just enough, too much, pleasure that was drowning, flooding, frantic.

Harry's fingers dug into Tom's shoulder just as painfully as the way Tom clutched his hair. He needed release so *badly* it hurt. It was all there was, building steadily inside him, a desperate, searing need.

'Harry,' Tom breathed, sounding so wonderfully on edge. So *close* that Harry groaned and kissed him again, messy and forceful.

So brilliantly, sinfully, disgustingly *right*. Harry's breathing stuttered and his hips jerked and he came with a broken off sound, Tom's cock still in his hand.

Shuddering, Harry panted against the slick skin of Tom's neck. His mind was foggy, delirious, and even as he twitched and gasped from his orgasm, he continued to jerk Tom off.

Right against his ear, Tom groaned, making Harry shiver from the vibration. He felt Tom's cock throb and spill into his hand. Fingers

yank hard at his hair and then let go.

They lay there for a moment, breathing heavily.

The sheets were cool against Harry's skin, which felt pleasantly warm. He was slick and sweaty and flush against Tom.

Shifting away, Harry opened his eyes.

They were on his bed, which was still tightly made, and there were pieces of uniforms strewn over the floor. His tie was near Abraxas' trunk, carelessly draped over a green lamp. His glasses glinted on the nightstand.

Slowly, Harry scanned the room and then turned back to Tom. His chest tightened as he looked at him: flushed, slick with sweat, and so shamelessly *naked.*

Harry tried not to stare.

'You look like your pet just died,' was Tom's first remark. His lips quirked upwards as he said it and Harry had the wild urge to laugh.

'Yeah,' he said, 'it's . . . '

His wand was sticking out of his robe pocket, a metre away from the bed. He could reach for it if he wanted, clumsily dress and pretend none of it ever happened.

Then what?

Harry touched his bottom lip, wondering if it was as swollen as it felt. And his fingers — he glanced down — were *disgusting.* Centimetres away, Tom's breathing was evening out. So close that Harry could still feel the heat of his skin.

'It's nothing,' Harry said and realised he meant it. Finding his wand, he vanished the mess between them, and set it aside. The dorm was locked, he thought. Then — *oh well.*

Harry rolled onto his side.

Tom's face was relaxed now, nicer than usual, more expressive. They looked at each other for a moment and Tom reached out to touch Harry's arm. He didn't say anything, only stroked his fingers along the skin in a light, curious way.

Harry shivered.

The urge came to him then — to touch the flushed part of Tom's cheekbone, run his hands through his strands of soft hair. How easily it would be to trick himself into thinking this was something soft. Something sweet and tender. Something *else*.

'We were arguing,' Harry said finally.

Tom's fingers stilled. 'Yes,' he said slowly, 'I think you were saying how utterly despicable I am.'

Harry hummed. The anger had fizzled out like a spark and suddenly he didn't care. When he shifted it over in his mind, he couldn't muster any regret. There was only awareness — clear and detached — and a strange sort of satisfaction.

He could admit it now, the guilt, the shame, the twisted need that was just as strong as Tom's.

'We should probably get up,' Tom said but didn't move. He was tracing an absent shape on Harry's arm.

'Yeah. Probably.'

It didn't matter if it was a mistake. It would kill him if he didn't, gnaw him up inside, all the what-ifs and agony. It had exhausted him for months, eating at him, following him, plaguing his mind always and always and *always*.

And if he was making a mistake, wasn't Tom making an equal if not greater one by letting him close?

Harry brushed a piece of hair from his eyes. 'What did Slughorn say,' he asked, 'about the defence position?'

His tone was light. He *felt* light. Unbothered, indifferent, curious.

Tom's face shifted but he didn't pull away. 'You know what he said. It's not going to happen. Try again in a few years.' He waved a hand dismissively though the anger in his voice was barely suppressed.

Harry sat up, feeling Tom's eyes on him.

'Did it ever happen,' Tom said, 'in your time?'

Pause. Awareness, choices, coming and going freely.

‘No,’ Harry said finally, ‘you never got it.’

Tom said nothing for a second and then stood and summoned his robe.

He was probably going for a walk, Harry thought, as he did the same. Or the chamber or the library or the dozen other places he used to pace and plan and plot.

They were silent as they dressed, the rustle of fabric and buttons the only noise.

‘What would you do,’ Harry said, ‘if it happens again?’

Tom snatched up his tie and then Harry’s, which he tossed to him. ‘Nothing, ‘he said. ‘What *could* I do?’

The material of the tie was silky in Harry’s fingers. Maybe it was the desire to not start another fight, the unwillingness to accept it, or the lack of sting from Dumbledore’s rejection, but right then it hadn’t occurred to Tom.

Harry thought of the cursed defence position and the long string of professors.

‘Nothing, I suppose,’ he said, sliding the tie over his neck and making a knot. He smiled faintly, running a hand through his hair and flattening it down.

Looking at the dormitory door, Harry murmured in parseltongue — *open* — and the lock clicked as it retracted.

Silently Tom watched him do it, something flashing across his face, odd and inscrutable and smoothed over in an instant.

‘I have to do rounds,’ he said lightly. ‘Do you want to come?’

Harry glanced back at the dorm, bathed in green torchlight, and smoothed down his robe.

They needed to talk, whether it ended in a fight or not. A knot in his chest was loosening and he shrugged, mulling it over.

‘Alright,’ Harry said and pulled open the door.

The Slug Club

It should have felt intrusive.

Tom knew everything — everything Harry had hidden and held onto, tightly and desperately, like it was all there was. *It had been.* He had his secrets — secrets that Harry barely allowed to fester in his own mind. Secrets he drew so close, buried so deep.

It should have been the end.

Shattered, like something rare and delicate, into a thousand sharp shards.

They walked through the darkened castle that night. The halls were swathed in moonlight, and so quiet that their footsteps echoed against the stone. The portraits were snoozing gently in their gilded frames, occasionally grumbling if a wand shone too close, and then lapsing back into thick, contented snores.

Harry had prepared for anger. Crushing despair. Regret and loathing and the previous tension creeping between them like fog. But as they walked, the silence wasn't stifling. The lapses in conversation felt natural. And Tom's presence by his side . . .

That felt natural too.

There was *something* there, just under the surface, but right then Harry was content not to prod it.

They talked of meaningless things with an unspoken agreement. It felt *good* to talk to Tom again, in a way that wasn't heated or tense. And when they finally went back to the common room — dark, still, expectant — Tom looked at him. His expression was settled.

'Goodnight, Harry,' he said, as they made their way up the stairs. And as if unable to help himself — 'are you going to pretend this never happened?'

They were outside the dorm. Tom's face was half cast in shadows, murky and distorted.

Harry let out a quiet huff of breath. 'No,' he said. 'Why, are you going to give me a reason to?'

‘Don’t you have countless?’ Tom was smiling a bit. ‘I’ll try not to. It might be impossible though. We appear destined to murder each other.’

‘Not destined,’ Harry said, pushing that idea firmly away. ‘Well, not *anymore.’*

‘ Of course not,’ Tom agreed. ‘Not for another fifty years anyway.’

Harry rolled his eyes as he pulled open the dormitory door. The lights were out and there was faint snoring coming from Rosier’s bed.

‘Reassuring,’ he said dryly, lowering his voice so not to wake anyone. ‘You could just not be a dick.’

‘Impossible. What do you want next, world peace?’ Tom was grinning as he said it though.

‘This really is an awful idea,’ Harry remarked. ‘What with the whole dark lord murderous thing.’

‘Well, I don’t want to murder *you.* A lot less than I did earlier anyway.’

Harry laughed quietly. ‘Yeah,’ he said, making his way to his four-poster. ‘Night, Tom.’

Tom paused as he reached his bed. Harry didn’t mind the closeness between them anymore. If anything, it made talking at night easier.

‘Night,’ Tom said, clearing his throat and shrugging off his uniform.

There was a heartbeat of silence where they looked at each other. Harry felt something warm shoot through him and blamed it on the tiredness. Everything seemed surreal at this hour.

He closed over his curtains and got into bed. The sheets smelled slightly like sex but mainly *Tom*, which was equally strange as it was comforting. Harry could hear him shuffle around. The snick of a trunk. His mattress dip. A rustle of duvets. He closed his eyes to all the noises of the dorm and sleep came easily.

Harry knew he had to talk to Tom but not how to do it without

everything crumbling. He rose early the next morning, last night's illusion shattering. The thought of greeting Abraxas was unpleasant. He would spot something on Harry's face — a darkening of his cheeks, perhaps a smirk— and ask a dozen questions.

The corridors were quiet and bright as Harry reached the Hall, mulling it over in his mind.

Real. That's what it would be.

No more delusions, no more flicking it on and off like a wonky tap.

Real.

Pushing open the doors of the Great Hall, he came into the stark morning light. It was early enough for the tables to be dotted with students and the noise to stay within the stone walls.

As he suspected, Harry spotted Tom sitting at the Slytherin table. There were half a dozen other students: first years, on the end of the bench, their conversation likely drifting right up to the professors; two fourth years who had once asked Harry eagerly about Grindelwald, eyes glinting in a way that reminded him very much of Rita Skeeter. And Tom, of course, Tom who glanced up as Harry entered the hall and then stilled as if not quite expecting it.

Harry liked that temporarily jolt of surprise — that crack of flawless composure — and used it to tamp down the uncertainty that rose within him.

Reaching the table, Harry sat down. There was no one around them except the fourth years, who glanced over and then away, very quickly, as though looking at Tom for too long would turn them to stone.

'Hello,' Tom said lightly. He was writing an *essay* — and that more than anything made Harry's lips twitch — but now carelessly folded it, placing it in his bag.

Tom looked rumpled — eyes absent, sipping at a cup of tea, tired in a way that made Harry wonder was he also plagued by nightmares. And which of them did they belong to?

Harry paused but Tom was watching him expectantly. To do something with his hands, he snatched a piece of toast from the centre of the table and then an apple.

‘So Voldemort,’ Harry began, making Tom’s face still. ‘I’m not going to . . . pretend it’s not there, because it is. It always has been. It’s going to end so badly but for now — ‘

‘For now, what?’

Tom reached for the teapot, tipping it into a nearby mug. Harry watched the steam curl from the dark liquid and the swirl of colour when milk splashed the surface.

‘Here,’ Tom said and was passing it across the table before Harry could do so much as blink.

He stared down at the tea and wrapped his hands around its warmth. ‘Thanks,’ Harry said, eyes flickering to Tom. It was an absent gesture. That was all.

‘For now, it’s just this. *This* where you’re a shitty person, and you lied to me for so long, and read Ron and Hermione’s minds and know about the past.’ He squeezed the mug. ‘But that’s all gone. And I know it’s gone but I’m still mad about it. About who you are and . . .‘

‘And?’

The windows near the Slytherin table were open and cool morning air was blowing in. The trees were alive with the sound of birdsong, sharp and melodic.

‘I can’t pretend anymore. About any of it.’

Harry drank some of his tea to stall the moment, ignoring the weight between them.

Tom was still — too still, barely blinking, barely breathing.

‘You offered me a shitty apology once,’ Harry said. ‘Would you still give it now?’

Tom’s face didn’t change. ‘Yes,’ he said immediately.

But we’d both know it wouldn’t be true.

‘Well, don’t. Because you don’t care — you’d do it again. You don’t care about the consequences, you never have, you never will, and I’m *sick* of pretending it’s any different.’

Harry’s throat was tight. It was a sting, a burn, rising right from the

pit of his stomach.

Tom touched his gaunt ring, his mouth doing something funny. Something *bitter*. 'I didn't want . . . this,' he said. 'I suppose that's too selfish for you though, isn't it?'

Harry tried to gauge his face and found it impossible. He swallowed. Picked up his toast and realised he never buttered it.

'No, 'Harry said. 'There's no point lying anymore. You already know everything. I don't even see what's in it for you anymore.'

That made Tom's face twist. For a second, Harry thought he was going to laugh.

'The same as what's in it for you, I believe. You *like* me.'

'You sound like a ten-year-old girl.'

'Admit it. Isn't this your great moment of truth?'

Harry gave him a dirty look but some of the tension between them diffused.

'Great moment of truth,' he repeated, raising his eyebrows doubtfully. 'You'd like that, wouldn't you, Tom? If my whole life revolved around *you.'*

' Very much,' Tom agreed. 'How long did it take you to come up with this little speech anyway? Were you tossing and turning and *agonising* over it all night?'

'I slept fine,' Harry said. 'And I'm improvising. I know you and the Death Eaters don't understand that concept — '

'You're such a *dick* — '

' And you're not?' Harry buttered his toast and glanced down the table. The smile was still hovering tentatively around his mouth.

'In my eyes, I'm practically a saint.'

Harry almost choked at that statement and Tom flashed him a grin. A sharp, quick one. *Real.*

' It's too early for this,' Harry said, and then his face fell. Professor Slughorn had risen from the Head Table and was leisurely making his

way towards them.

‘Distract him,’ Harry said, lowering his voice. ‘Say something pretentious.’

Tom only laughed.

Professor Slughorn was there in a second, a coffee cup in his hand, his ruddy face beaming. ‘Harry Potter,’ he said, ‘just the person I wanted to see.’

‘Really, sir?’ Harry schooled his face into some semblance of innocence and kicked Tom under the table.

‘Yes, my boy. I happened to notice you weren’t in the common room the other day. We’re having quite the party on Friday. A little thing leading up to Christmas. And there’s the quidditch match on Sunday — how’re the team playing? Are they any good?’

‘They’re great,’ Harry said. ‘I’m sure Alphard would have more idea of what Hufflepuff play like though.’

Slughorn waved a hand. ‘Nonsense. You’re a fine player. Best I’ve seen in a long time. A very long time indeed . . . ‘

He sat down across from him, on the bench beside Tom.

Tom didn’t seem surprised by this and began chatting with ease. Harry forgot about how close they were sometimes and zoned out until he heard his name.

‘. . . How are you settling into the house, Harry? It’s been awfully tense in Slytherin. I suppose you have something to do with that, Tom, they look up to you quite a bit.’

Harry barely suppressed a snort, his eyebrows raising.

‘I don’t know about that,’ Tom said.

‘No? You’re being modest. I’ve heard quite the contrary.’

Harry bet that he had. He imagined Professor Slughorn knew a lot more about what went on than he liked to admit.

‘Anyway, Harry, about this party —what do you say?’

They were both looking at him expectantly. Slughorn, blonde

moustache quivering; Tom, blank-faced, eyes betraying all his mirth.

Harry chewed his lip and knew he had no way out of it. ‘Sounds good,’ he said, forcing his face into a smile. ‘I’ll see you there, sir.’

Slughorn beamed at him, reaching across the table to pat him on the shoulder. ‘Excellent, excellent . . . I’ll see you boys later in potions.’

When he left, Tom’s face cracked. ‘Unlucky,’ he said, voice low with false sympathy. ‘You can’t refuse a personal invitation.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry agreed. ‘A shame you didn’t get one too. I guess I’m his new favourite.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘I could leave after an hour anyway. I’m sure that’s enough time for your Death Eater meeting to take place.’

‘It’s not a *Death Eater meeting.’* Tom shook his head. ‘The other houses are invited too.’

‘Sounds exciting.’

Students were coming into the hall now — a stream of Ravenclaws and a few yawning Slytherins. Harry turned back to his breakfast and despite it all, couldn’t manage to feel annoyed.

The days crept up. Now that he was talking to Tom again, the long stretches of time disappeared. Something easy settled between them, lodging so neatly into place that Harry wondered how they had ever done it before. The days were so filled with distraction —with Quidditch and classes and Abraxas and *Tom* — that Harry barely had time to dwell on anything that had happened.

When he caught Hermione’s eye across the classroom, it came back. A jolt. A closing of his throat. When he heard Ron’s voice, achingly familiar and just out of reach, something inside him stirred and tossed.

The divide felt like a physical thing now but Harry didn’t seek them out. The urge to deny it came back, to recoil and divide the two

aspects of his life, never allowing them to meet. Instead, Harry just *waited.*

Friday came quickly. The common room was abuzz with excitement, many of the students never having been invited to the Slug Club before. The energy was contagious and Harry forced himself not to dwell on the fact that he no longer had his two best friends.

As they fiddled with their robes — Harry's belonging to Abraxas who owned at least a dozen — he forced the thoughts from his mind.

The floor was strewn with clothes and crumpled parchment. In front of a mirror, Rosier was slicking back his hair. Alphard was daubing cologne on his neck and Avery was slugging from a bottle of firewhiskey that he kept beneath his bed.

'What do you reckon,' Harry said to Abraxas, 'live fairies? A band? Ice sculptures?'

'He had a band a few times,' Abraxas said, fumbling with the buttons at his collar. 'I don't know. It doesn't matter.'

His voice sounded oddly stiff but before Harry could do as much as frown, Abraxas made his way to the bathroom, muttering something about toothbrushes.

'Family problems,' Tom said knowingly. He was adjusting his robe — black, with a deep red trim, and looking unfairly handsome. Privately, Harry reckoned *Abraxas* had bought it — how else would he have the money?

'His dad?' Harry asked, smoothing a hand through his hair to no avail.

'Probably. They usually have a spectacular argument about once a year. Lots of moping and letters and floo calls.' He shrugged. 'Or maybe it's just Quidditch.'

'His dad's coming to the match,' Harry remembered and glanced at the closed bathroom door.

He didn't have long to wonder about it before they were leaving the dorm and making the journey to Professor Slughorn's office. There weren't live fairies or ice sculptures. In fact, when Professor Slughorn pulled open the door, it was hard to see much at all in the misty light.

‘Boys,’ Slughorn said, beaming from ear to ear. ‘Come in, come in. And Harry! It’s quite the day indeed. I have a lot of pressure now, don’t I?’ He wagged a finger. ‘I can’t have you vanishing on us again.’

Harry smiled weakly and said he wouldn’t dream of it.

The office was unrecognisable. It had expanded to the size of a small dining room, where many people in brightly coloured outfits were milling around. Unlike the last time he had been here, they were mostly Slytherins, their faces flickering in and out of candlelight as they moved.

It was very much a *Slytherin* party and something about the low lighting, the tables, and the way Slughorn was standing like a proud father, made this fact ring in Harry’s ears.

He barely had a chance to take in the room before something was being thrust into his hands. ‘. . . heard you wanted to play Quidditch after school. These might bring you a bit of luck, and something to remember me by when you become famous.’

It was a pair of Quidditch gloves, belonging to a member of the Chudley Cannons.

. ‘Caught his very first snitch with those,’ Slughorn continued. ‘Right here at Hogwarts. Course he was Filius’ student, really, but still - it’s not *Filius* who gets a monthly owl, is it?’

Harry’s throat dried up. For a second, he couldn’t speak but when he did, it was with sincerity that he said thanks.

Slughorn clapped him on the back. ‘. . . no trouble. It was no trouble at all.’

Harry let Alphard look at the gloves, who was far more eager than him, and wondered where Abraxas had gotten to. It was hard to see in the darkened room, and about a dozen people bumped into him. He spotted him talking with Belinda beside one of the white-clothed tables, both of them looking serious.

‘I knew I was his favourite,’ Harry said to Tom, when Slughorn hurried off to greet some first years.

‘He’s trying to bribe you into liking him,’ Tom said. ‘Though heaven knows why.’ He was scanning the room in interest as if looking for a target to go and introduce himself to.

‘Haven’t you seen my potions ability? He’s probably never seen as much natural talent in his life.’

Tom’s eyes made their way back to him. ‘A lot of . . . improvisation,’ he said. ‘Really creative. It’s no wonder he wants you to stick to Quidditch.’

Harry glared at him and Tom’s lips twitched.

‘You should tell him you want to be an *Auror,’* he said. ‘Slughorn will love that.’

‘I’m not dealing with murderous glares from your friends the entire night,’ Harry said. ‘And anyway, I don’t know if I want to be an Auror anymore. I already wonder if I’m going to die on a daily basis with you around. The excitement starts to wear off.’

‘The fact you wanted to become an Auror in the first place is baffling. Wasn’t defeating Voldemort enough for a lifetime's satisfaction?’

‘Well, I didn’t think I’d *survive* fighting Voldemort.’

He stopped, because he had said too much, and by the expression on Tom’s face, he also picked up on it. Harry hadn't meant to divulge the fact that he didn’t expect to survive the year. That being here, and not in the midst of constant danger, was so absurd he was questioning everything.

‘Isn’t it a good thing you ended up here, then? You aren’t going to *die.’*

They had picked their way through the crowd. Tom’s words were low but Harry caught them easily. Even with the noise all around, his voice was easily distinguishable.

‘We have very different ideas on death,’ Harry said. ‘I don’t fear it the same way you do. It isn’t *everything*. I know I’m going to die. I accepted it. I still do. And if I was dying for a cause — to finally kill Voldemort and end all the misery — it wouldn’t matter what happened to me.’

Tom hummed. ‘You’re such a martyr. Dumbledore probably ingrained those nonsense ideas into your head. As if offering a teenager up for the Wizarding World is a normal and logical thing to do.’

‘It wasn’t like that. And let’s face it, future you decided to dedicate

your life to hunting down and *murdering* me. So it's not like I could have avoided it.'

Tom didn't say anything, just raised one of his eyebrows, looking unimpressed.

'Well, not future you,' Harry amended. 'An alternate version of you. *Voldemort.'*

'I *am* Voldemort. You just refuse to acknowledge it.'

'Not the Voldemort I know. Trust me, you don't want to be . . . that.'

His skin prickled at the image. The waxy, melted face, the thin, wavering voice, those glowing scarlet eyes . . .

Tom paused, intrigued. 'Oh?'

Harry shook his head. 'You went so far trying to escape death that you became . . . A mess. No offence.'

'And what exactly does *that* mean?'

'Just — 'Harry hesitated.

On one of the tables nearby, a variety of snacks had been laid out. He picked up one of the small sandwiches and popped it in his mouth.

'How do you feel about your nose?' Harry said slowly.

'My nose?'

'It's a nice nose, right? I mean, it makes your face. Gives you that classical look.'

'Thanks.' Tom raised his eyebrows expectantly and Harry chewed his lip.

'You didn't have one in the future. Or any hair, come to think of it.'

'What do you mean I had *no hair?'*

Harry suppressed a laugh at Tom's disbelieving tone. 'You had no nose. Or hair. I told you, Voldemort was *barely* human. Too many horcruxes and attempts to rise back from the dead.'

He felt a slight tinge of relish as Tom absently patted his hair.

‘Oh well,’ Tom said. ‘Inconvenient, of course, but power is much more important than appearance. Being barely human doesn’t bother me.’

Harry stared at him for a moment and his eyes widened. ‘You’re lying.’

‘I’m not lying. I don’t care — or I *won’t* care in fifty years. Anyway, it’s not like a killing curse is going to defeat me again.’

‘Careful, Tom, your arrogance is showing. Aren’t we at a *party?’*

Tom perked up. ‘ Of course. I’m going to talk to Millicent Cuffe. Do you know what happened to her in your time?’

Harry paused to think about it. ‘You probably murdered her.’

‘You could just say *no.’* He left, shaking his head, and when Harry turned around, he almost collided with another boy.

‘Sorry,’ Harry said immediately, but the other boy was staring at him.

‘You’re Harry Potter, right?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said. ‘Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met.’

He had to be at least in fifth year, sandy-haired, freckled, with startling blue eyes. ‘Conor Burke,’ he said, holding out a hand which Harry shook. ‘How’re you finding Hogwarts?’ he continued, smiling tentatively to reveal dimples in both his cheeks.

‘It’s great,’ Harry said. ‘So much better than home-schooling. The castle’s brilliant.’

He didn’t mention Tom, or Slytherin, or any of the things Conor was probably trying to question him on. Grindelwald, perhaps?

‘Right?’ Conor agreed, as though Harry had said something particularly insightful. ‘You have a Quidditch match on Sunday, don’t you?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said. ‘Do you play?’

He thought Conor might say something along the lines of, *I used to until you took my place*, but this didn’t happen.

‘No,’ he said, ‘definitely not. I hate heights and well, flying . . . ‘

Harry winced sympathetically

‘Anyway, Harry.’ Conor Burke cleared his throat. ‘I’ll see you around. It was nice meeting you.’

‘You too,’ Harry said, feeling rather bemused. He offered him a smile, which made Conor duck his head and hasten another goodbye.

Harry watched him hurry off through the crowd until he disappeared.

‘Aren’t you *adorable.’*

He spun around to Tom’s face, dark in the dim lights.

‘Very,’ Harry said, heart stuttering. ‘What have I done this time?’

‘Forging your new friendships. Using these meetings just as they were intended. You’re a proper little Slytherin tonight, aren’t you?’

‘I’ll have you know, *he* came up to me.’

‘Burke?’ His smile turned sharp. ‘How bold of him.’

‘I know, *speaking.* How dare he. What happened to Cuffe?’

‘She’s busy.’

They drifted in and out of the crowd, occasionally talking to the people they passed. Tom was in a good mood, Harry could tell. His face was bright as he engaged in conversation, charming the room easily. In his element, Harry thought.

It was more fascinating than disturbing to witness and as the night bore on, Harry started to find watching Tom interesting. It was so obviously a mask and yet he enjoyed it. He positively *lit up.*

It wasn’t long before Professor Slughorn was ushering them around one of the long tables, lit by floating candles. The silver cutlery gleamed in the low candlelight and Slughorn’s face was flushed and red as he dabbed at his chin with a napkin.

Harry ended up sitting beside Tom, with an exemplary view of the table. Across from him was Lucretia, her curly black hair held in place with pins. Walburga Black sat beside her, radiant in red satin, and watching Harry with dark, glittering eyes.

Most of the guests had left or were chatting in quiet corners of the

room. The younger Slytherins had mostly disappeared as well, though Harry spotted several of them at one of the separate tables.

Slughorn was going around the table, greeting everyone individually. ‘Does your mother still make that famous gooseberry pie, Barnabus?’

‘. . . Yes, yes, he’s done quite well for himself — we could all share a bit of that fortune, eh?’

When he reached Tom, he practically preened. This was where Tom had gotten a taste for praise and devotion. Perhaps the very notion of Voldemort cemented in his mind while sitting at this table, surrounded by admiring faces.

Without fully joining in, Harry listened to the talk, observing the careful dynamic that was in place.

It was very much the casual, intimate thing Slughorn boasted about. The Slytherins were relaxed — were *close* — just as Tom always said. It was no wonder they believed they were destined for great things with a force like Slughorn, steering them down a path with a waggle of his finger.

They were talking about careers when food appeared on the plates. There was a pop and a great lunge for cutlery as everyone began eating at once. Harry glanced down at his plate thoughtfully. It was a rich, dark stew served on a bed of rice. Much too fancy for the Great Hall.

‘So Abraxas,’ Slughorn said, taking a deep swig from his wine glass. ‘I was talking to Lorcan Bobbin in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. He sent me a delightful letter about his latest case. I thought immediately of you. Your father thinks you’d be a great asset there, doesn’t he?’

Abraxas diced a piece of beef and swallowed. ‘Yes. He does . . . think that.’

‘Not keen then? I heard about your paintings. Quite the artist, aren’t you?’

‘I don’t know about that, sir.’

Harry watched Abraxas’ face. It was slack and oddly distant. His words had a delayed quality, as though he was thinking hard before they came out.

‘Of course, the ministry has great opportunities. It would be foolish not to acknowledge that.’

Abraxas hummed noncommittally and made an exaggerated motion of drinking from his glass.

Slughorn was undeterred. ‘You were interested in Magizoology before, weren’t you, Abraxas? I remember our career meeting in fifth year. Why, you came right through that door and there wasn’t a doubt in your head.’ He smiled fondly, oblivious to Abraxas’ glazed expression.

‘You could still go into Quidditch,’ Slughorn continued. ‘There aren’t many jobs that will give you the fame and money it boasts. And, of course, the *excitement.* Right, Harry?’

‘Right,’ Harry agreed, relieved for once to have the attention on him. ‘Though I don’t know about a career out of it anymore, so much as a hobby.’

‘No? You too?’ He shook his head and set down his glass of wine. The liquid sloshed, and several red drops landed on the tablecloth. ‘Merlin, boys, you’re really leaving your options open. And that’s a shame, Harry, a damn shame indeed. What will you do instead?’

‘I don’t know yet,’ Harry said.

‘Have you ever thought about curse-breaking? It has all the thrill of Quidditch, though plenty of danger. And you’d be working directly from Gringotts and some people don’t like having to deal with the goblins. Plenty of travel, however, plenty of excitement . . . ‘

Curse-breaking.

Bill Weasley raved about it. Ron thought it was the epitome of cool.

But when Harry thought about his future — *really* thought about it — only Voldemort seemed to loom ahead.

‘My father’s a curse-breaker,’ someone said. ‘He has about a dozen scars to prove it too.’

It was Conor Burke, who had spoken to him earlier, and now sat between Alphard and a red-haired girl Harry didn’t recognise.

‘I could owl him for you. Or *you* could owl him. Anyway, I think you’d suit the job description well.’

‘Thanks,’ Harry said, feeling touched. ‘Why, do I look like the sort of person who runs head-first into dangerous tombs?’

He grinned to show he was joking and Slughorn laughed loudly, slapping his hand against the table.

Conor Burke, however, flushed when they made eye contact and smiled awkwardly.

Tom cleared his throat and Burke jumped like he had been stung. ‘Did anyone hear about the curse-breaker in Bulgaria last week?’ Tom said lightly, ignoring the reaction.

It started another round of intense conversation, this time with more genuine interest. Harry listened as Tom easily wove a tale, and glanced at Abraxas. The distance between them was too great to talk and when Harry tried to catch his friend’s eye, he failed. Abraxas was sipping at his drink, oblivious to everything going on.

Harry met Belinda’s eyes instead and raised an eyebrow questioningly. She just shook her head.

When the meal ended, Slughorn dragged Abraxas off to meet one of his many guests and music started up. Harry chatted to Lucretia for a while, got forced into a conversation with a witch who wrote for the Daily Prophet, and finally found Tom.

‘I must say, curse-breaking beats the Auror Academy if you want to recklessly put your life in danger.’ He was flushed from the heat of the room and looking pleased.

‘Maybe I’ll do something nice and quiet then,’ Harry said. ‘Teach.’

‘You’ll teach?’ Tom smirked at him. ‘Let me guess, Defence? ’

‘No,’ Harry said, ‘that one’s yours. I’m thinking *Muggle Studies.’*

Tom laughed — a sharp, surprised laugh — and Harry found himself smiling. The prospect of life after Hogwarts brought a strange, uncertain feeling that made his insides swoop.

‘I think I’d like to travel,’ Harry said, ‘and actually see the Wizarding World. Or at least part of it. It was so magical in first-year. So *unbelievable.’*

Before Voldemort.

Before you.

'And everything we learn in Hogwarts is just a foundation,' Tom said. 'There's so many different variants and aspects of magic that we don't even touch on. The curriculum is just a taste in the grand scheme of things.'

'Right? I remember when I went to see the Quidditch World Cup and realised that everything I knew about magic was so *limited*.'

'To really study magic, to step foot outside of Britain and become immersed in it, would take years. And even then, it's ever-changing. You're so lucky, Harry, to have experienced the Wizarding world in fifty years' time and come back with that knowledge.'

'I wouldn't say lucky. It's frustrating. And yet even with that knowledge, there's so much I missed out on.'

So much time where he was fighting for his life. Not expecting the next day to come. Knowing nothing, *nothing,* but Voldemort.

Tom's face was bright—intense—and when Harry looked at him it was like he was being doused with cold water.

A hollow tree in Albania.

All those years where he disappeared, came back immersed in dark magic, more deadly than before. All those long years.

'You only want to study magic to take over the Wizarding World,' Harry said. 'To use it as a weapon, ensure you're the best, and then build a following. And for what? To have mindless servants doing your job? To be in the shadows, knowing you've done it, achieved all your goals and that's *it?'*

Someone bumped into him and hastily apologised. Harry lowered his voice.

'You weren't content in my time. Even when you reigned and had what you wanted. It wasn't *enough.'*

' So what's your solution? I *don't* go ahead with the very thing that my life is centred around?' Tom shook his head. 'You wouldn't be content either, Harry, and how could you, when all you've experienced is the opposite? When you're not trying to prove something, or being weighed down by expectations, you don't even know yourself. We're

not so different, you and I.'

'Except I don't want to take over the Wizarding World and mindlessly control it. You want the power, the knowledge, but even then, that's not enough. You can have all your psychotic urges and temporary satisfactions — '

'Your presumptions really are astounding. I'll be perfectly satisfied. Psychotic urges included.'

Tom spotted something behind Harry because his whole face changed. Harry turned around to Abraxas stumbling towards them.

'Harry,' Abraxas said, in a thick voice. 'There you are. Some party, huh?' He laughed, nearly knocking into the nearby table.

Harry instinctively reached out a hand to steady him. 'Some party,' he agreed, taking in the flushed cheeks and bright unfocused eyes. 'Are you okay?'

'Great,' Abraxas said, and then turned to Tom and *waved.*

Harry's eyebrows shot upwards, and he forced down the urge to laugh. 'Does Slughorn know you're drunk?'

'I'm not drunk.' Abraxas shook his head firmly, as though conveying this was vital. 'And he wouldn't care. He *never* cares, only if it —when it suits him. Right, Tom?'

'Yes,' Tom said, watching Abraxas as though he found this whole thing amusing.

Harry winced at the volume of Abraxas' voice and spotted Professor Slughorn near the door, the bald spot on his head gleaming like a galleon.

'Did you see your artist — Flume?' Harry said.

'Oh, yeah. We didn't have anything to talk about. Except for — we talked about my father. I think. That's all anyone cares about. *Him.'*

' I don't care about him,' Harry said, but Abraxas was vigorously shaking his head.

'They *do.* Slughorn. My father. No, wait— 'Abraxas' brows furrowed and Harry looked quickly at Tom.

‘Were you talking to him?’ Harry said. ‘Your father?’

Abraxas shook his head. ‘Wouldn’t call it talking. He owled me. Too *busy* to come and see my Quidditch match. I guess that’s good though. We can mess it up and nothing matters.’

He was holding a goblet in his hand — the one he had been nursing through dinner and Harry suspected now to be refilling — which he swigged.

‘Want some?’

‘I’m fine,’ Harry said.

‘Sure? It’s firewhiskey. Like fifty years old or something. I don’t know . . . ‘He drank again, and then looked at him, eyes widening. *‘Harry*.’

‘Yes?’

‘You showed up. *You* actually showed up. And you’re still here! That’s — ‘he waved a hand. ‘A miracle.’

‘I’m full of surprises,’ Harry said.

‘No, but, really, *what* — ‘ he jerked a hand towards Tom, much to Harry’s embarrassment. ‘What is — ‘

‘Are you sure you want to finish that sentence, Abraxas?’ Tom said dryly.

Abraxas swallowed and looked at Harry again, who had the wild urge to laugh.

‘Let’s go meet some people,’ Abraxas said. ‘Come on, I’ll show you — um — *him.’*

Tom snorted which only made Abraxas grab Harry’s arm, fully intending to introduce him to an elderly wizard who was talking with Slughorn.

‘I’ll pass,’ Harry said, ‘no offence, I’m sure it would be great.’

‘It *would.* Come on — ‘

He set his goblet down, eyes foggy. ‘And then I can ask Slughorn why he never cares about anything but appearances.’

‘We’ll ask him tomorrow,’ Harry said.

‘Really?’

‘If you still want to. But right now — ‘

‘You’re meeting Hodgins. He’s a nice bloke, I think. Scholarly and stuff. You clearly like that.’

‘Harry’s already met Hodgins,’ Tom said, voice laden with amusement.

Harry shot him a grateful look, but Abraxas’ face fell.

‘Oh! Well, then — ‘

He never got to finish the sentence. Belinda was weaving between them, her face brightening in relief when she spotted Harry.

‘He’s completely hammered,’ Harry said to her. ‘You better hope Slughorn doesn’t decide to come over here.’

‘He *will,* with you and Tom standing here.’ She pulled a face and touched Abraxas’ shoulder. ‘Do you want to leave? The party’s nearly over anyway.’

‘No, I’m talking to Harry. He showed up. Crazy, right?’

‘Harry’s been here the whole night.’ Belinda’s earrings were long and glittery and snagging in her hair which was pinned back. ‘You’re going to embarrass yourself. Slughorn can *ignore* the fact you’re drunk, but if you go and talk to someone it’s a different story.’

Abraxas nodded absently. ‘I want to go outside,’ he said, eyes lighting up. ‘And play Quidditch.’

‘It’s past midnight,’ Belinda said.

‘And? What do you say, Harry?’

‘I think it’s raining. And we only have two players.’

And you’ll fall off your broom and drown in the lake.

‘Tom?’ Abraxas looked at him hopefully.

‘I’ll pass,’ Tom said, nose wrinkling.

‘Come on.’ Belinda tugged his arm and this time Abraxas complied.

‘Wait,’ he began, pausing. ‘Harry. Are you disappearing again?’

‘I’m right here.’ Harry glanced back at Tom, feeling suddenly tired. ‘I’ll come too. Before Slughorn decides to show me his quill collection or something.’ He pulled a face, glancing around the room.

It was half-empty now, music playing low in the background and lights dancing across the darkened ceiling.

‘See you later,’ Tom said. ‘Maybe.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry agreed, stifling a yawn. He followed Abraxas and Belinda into the darkened hall and was hit with a flood of cool air. It was so quiet after the atmosphere of the office that he closed his eyes in relish.

Abraxas made a queasy noise in his throat at the sudden change. ‘So, what’s going on *there?’* He said, holding up a hand for them to stop walking. ‘And slow down. God.’

‘Going on where?’ Harry said. The music coming from Slughorn’s office was masked and the corridor was empty.

Abraxas moved to sit down on the nearest bench, leaning his head against the stone wall and breathing out. ‘With Tom,’ he said, eyes shut. ‘Merlin, I feel sick. Distract me. Tell me . . . Something.’

‘A bucket would be a good distraction,’ Harry said, but nevertheless moved forward. ‘What do you want to know?’

‘About *you.* And Tom. That’s so weird. How did it even happen?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Harry said, rather awkwardly.

‘He’s so intimidating! So bossy. No, no — *authoritative.*’ Abraxas pulled a face. ‘I’m glad we’re friends, Harry. Did I ever tell you that? You’re nice and stuff.’

‘Thanks, Abraxas. I’m glad we’re friends too.’

‘And my father, he’d *hate* you. No offence. He hates everyone. He hates *me.’* He frowned, rising unsteadily to his feet. ‘Forgot I said that. I don’t . . . ‘

‘It’s okay,’ Harry said. ‘We don’t have to talk about it. You should

probably try and sleep it off.'

Abraxas reached out towards Belinda who absently patted his arm. 'Harry's right,' she said. 'Do you want to go to the kitchens and get some water?'

'No, I'll go to bed. House elves give me the creeps.'

They laughed as they made their way back to the common room, and harder as Abraxas tried to explain his point — *all the glowing eyes. And they just appear. It's* weird. *It is!*

The room was quiet apart from Avery, who had passed out in an armchair, and Lucretia and Alphard, who were sprawled near the empty fireplaces and waved them over.

Abraxas quickly got distracted by their conversation, waving his arms earnestly and tripping on the mat. Alphard and Lucretia snorted with laughter.

'Hey, Harry,' Belinda said quietly. She had moved away from the centre of the room and was standing near the stairs. 'I just wanted to apologise for the last time. When I, well — '

'Drugged me?'

She winced. 'Yeah, that. And I know it means nothing but I wish I hadn't. I'm sorry.'

Harry blew out a breath and looked at her. 'It's fine,' he said. 'Let's just forget about it, okay?'

Belinda paused, seemed to study him, and then nodded her head. 'Okay,' she said. 'Thank you.'

He smiled. 'Anyway, I need to listen to Abraxas' drunken rambles for the rest of the night which should be fun. Do you know what happened with his dad?'

She chewed her lip. 'He wrote him a letter. A *bad* one. They never get on, but Abraxas always tries anyway even though it's doomed to fail. It's *sad* but this isn't the first time he's gotten his hopes crushed.'

She was taking the pins out of her hair and shaking it out. Harry watched the way her eyes flickered to Abraxas in tender concern, and he gently touched her shoulder.

‘I’ll look after him, ‘Harry said. ‘I’ll even answer his weird questions.’

‘Poor you. At least he wouldn’t remember it tomorrow.’

‘Hopefully,’ Harry agreed, knowing with his luck that it wouldn’t be the case.

Abraxas didn’t take any more prompting to go to the dorm. He threw up down the toilet as soon as they entered and Harry poured him a glass of water from the tap, stomach rolling at the noise. Then Abraxas started talking about flying, and Tom, and finally house-elves, nodding his head fervently, willing Harry to agree.

‘They’re so creepy,’ Harry lied, as they lay in their four-posters, curtains still open.

‘Exactly! It’s the eyes, right? And the jumpy movements?’

‘Terrifying,’ Harry said, smiling into the dark.

Rosier growled something unintelligible under his breath and they fell silent.

Harry listened for a while, to the little noises of the dorm and the shuffle of movement, and when Abraxas began snoring steadily, he closed his curtains.

Wax and Wane

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tom woke to a pounding headache.

Shards of light were coming through the cracks in the curtains, burning like sunbeams against his eyelids. His mouth tasted stale and the room was quiet in a way that meant it was either very early or very late. The latter, judging by the glaring light.

He lay there for a while, body too heavy to move, trying to piece together the fuzzy blotches of the night before.

William Selwyn.

That's what it was.

Bloody Selwyn who had forced about a dozen drinks into his hand.

They had been talking about the ministry. The man — despicable and snivelling, though he was — worked for the Wizengamot. Harry had left and Slughorn latched onto Tom like a barnacle. Patting him on the arm, sour wine breath in his face, distant rambling about Professor Merrythought — *I'm sorry, I know. But teaching at Hogwarts? You could do so much better, Tom. You're made for great things, and we both know it.*

Selwyn, all whiskers and grey hair and inquisitive eyes. Robes that cost hundreds of galleons. Pureblood and affluent and everything Tom wanted.

Tom sat up and wondered if this was what Harry's headaches felt like. They were probably more of a targeted pain, he imagined, gravitating around his scar. Tom's head *throbbed.*

Selwyn had been intriguing and there was nothing Tom liked more than making connections. Selwyn had been rich and influential and the sort of person Tom needed to get to the top. And he *had* made a good impression, at least. Selwyn had been all smiles and laughter, like they were best friends. He had practically promised him a chance in the ministry.

A good chance. A *great* one. Practically impossible for a no-name half-blood like himself.

Tom finally rose — body protesting at the movement — and dragged himself to the bathroom. As he suspected, the dorm was mostly empty. It smelled stale and stuffy and from behind his closed curtains, Abraxas made a pitiful groaning noise. 'Harry? Is that you?'

'I'm afraid not,' Tom said, nose wrinkling. Abraxas was such a *mess* sometimes.

'Oh. Sorry, Tom.'

Silence.

Abraxas sounded more composed at once. Halfway to the bathroom, Tom paused, anticipating the follow-up question before it came.

Sure enough, in a much steadier voice, Abraxas asked him for the time.

'Twelve,' Tom said, wincing at the thought. Why did he drink the damn things anyway?

In similar social situations, he would charm the glasses into water, while his companions got hopelessly drunk. *Tom* had the upper hand in that case and could easily obtain information from someone with a much looser tongue. It was easy. Subtle. Ensuring him complete control.

In the bathroom, he splashed his face with water and a memory rose.

Harry, a little smile playing at his lips, telling him what had become of his appearance.

Harry.

That was the root of all this.

Harry had left the party, and Selwyn had been prattling on for what seemed like hours. The alcohol had softened the painful ordeal, blurred it around the edges, made it more tolerable.

Harry had left and Tom had been *bored*.

His mouth felt less dry after drinking water, but the knowledge of Harry's influence left it sour. Normally Tom could stomach every

snivelling, spineless guest no matter how annoying they were. Normally Tom didn't get so bored his teeth clenched; didn't think of *Harry* and how much more tolerable things had been with him around. Didn't think of Harry as a much better alternative. A more pleasant companion. A distraction to the things that were meant to be important.

His appearance. The conviction in Harry's tone. The flat way he told him what he had become. The thing *he had been.*

When he was finished in the bathroom —Abraxas still not up, curtains closed —he made his way to the common room.

Tom wasn't vain. He knew the advantages his looks could give him. But if he was really powerful — powerful in the irrevocable way he had always desired —they wouldn't matter. So why couldn't he stop thinking about it?

Horcruxes or appearance.

When the choice was stripped down to that, it seemed obvious. He would always favour the former. He saw the way the second horcrux had left a red glint in his eyes — a certain gleam that came with heightened emotions.

Tom *liked* the way his eyes flashed.

But what about the rest? His face, his hair, his nose?

Had it been the horcruxes, the resurrection rituals, or a combination of the two?

The common room was quiet when he entered, with soothing green light and clean, filtered air. Tom breathed out slowly until his mind was settled.

Lucretia and Belinda were sitting near the fireplace, with empty plates of breakfast piled on the coffee table. Both of them looked chipper — though he knew Lucretia had spent the night drinking firewhiskey and sneaking off to shag *Ignatius Prewett.*

Alphard and Harry were talking amicably. Quidditch, based on Alphard's hand gestures. Fucking *Alphard.*

'Why do you look like you've been sentenced to life in Azkaban?' Harry said, pausing his conversation to raise his eyebrows. He looked

perfectly relaxed sitting there, hair tousled, face soft.

Tom hated the way any biting retort died down at that expression. Hated the way Harry's presence instantly dulled his anger.

'Are you *hungover*?' Harry said, looking absolutely delighted at the possibility.

'Don't be ridiculous.'

Harry laughed. His face was so bright, so entertained, that Tom's thoughts faded away instantly. Alphard too was looking at him rather curiously.

'Let me guess,' Harry continued, 'you were *charming* one of Slughorn's guests until all hours of the morning and got fed up.'

'Of course not.'

'You and Slughorn are secretly drinking buddies, who tearfully tell each other your troubles — '

Alphard laughed, making Tom and Harry both look at him. He faltered at Tom's expression —still annoyed, though this time not intentional.

'Is Abraxas awake?' Harry said, clearing his throat.

'I'm not sure,' Tom said. 'Has Slughorn been around yet?'

'You missed him. He was here just after breakfast. Which you missed *as well,* by the way.'

'Why do you sound so gleeful about it?'

'Sorry.' He didn't look very sorry. 'I'm not gleeful.'

Tom made an unimpressed noise. His head was throbbing dully and Alphard was looking at him far too thoughtfully. The thought of leaving the common room and being alone had never been more desirable.

'I'm going to the kitchens,' Tom said shortly. 'You know, for that breakfast I missed.'

'Oh. Do you want company?'

Tom paused.

It was rare that Harry tolerated him. Rare that he'd offer something with such utter sincerity, not a hint of hesitation in his tone. Something — that felt awfully like victory — fluttered inside Tom's chest.

'If you want,' he said, and as they left the common room, he could barely suppress a smile.

Harry was telling him about Abraxas' supposed fear of house-elves as they sat in the kitchen. Tom watched the way his mouth moved as he talked, curving upwards at the corners. They had already eaten breakfast; Harry, his second, which had rather forcefully been heaped upon him by the house-elves.

Sipping his coffee absently, Tom listened. His headache had disappeared, and apart from a crick in his neck from the awkward way he had slept, he felt normal.

'I can't believe Abraxas asked you to play Quidditch with him,' Harry was saying. 'I guess the alcohol numbed his usual state of terror.'

'You're cruel,' Tom said and smiled.

'Well, it's true. I like him and all, but he practically *wets himself* when you so much as breathe near him.' Harry paused. In the lights of the kitchen, his face was positively aglow.

'How did that start anyway? The origin of the Death Eaters?'

Tom thought about it for a moment and wondered just what he would have to say to make Harry disgusted. It was a fine line they trod, always without qualms or delicacy.

'I found out I was a parselmouth — as in, had a rare gift passed down from Salazar Slytherin — in first-year. *That* quickly gained me more respect. As an heir of Slytherin, I could no longer be dismissed as some pathetic mudblood orphan.'

He watched Harry's eyes widen at the words.

‘I wanted to find the Chamber of Secrets. Because while the older students were politely curious, they still looked down at a younger, less capable student — a descendant of Slytherin or not.’

Harry was watching him carefully, any disgust he had concealed.

‘Obviously, I needed to become more powerful. That wasn’t hard. I was already the most powerful in my year, and I had a lot of control over wandless magic, which was showier than anything from a library book. I had to *prove myself.’*

‘Through lots of violence and torture?’

Tom shook his head. ‘More — blackmail. Finding out secrets and weaknesses. Studying people. Learning their motives, their desires, their *fears.* Slytherins is already a hive mind of connections and opinions. I only had to tap into it. Give them an outlet for their desires.’

‘And the fact everyone is terrified of you?’

'That may have something to do with the violence and torture.’

Harry snorted. ‘Nothing to do with the fifty-foot basilisk under the school?’

‘Well, yes, that certainly gained healthy apprehension — ‘

‘Terror.’

Tom’s lips quirked. ‘If they weren’t so spineless, I might respect them a bit.’

‘You’d *hate it* if they stood up to you though. The respect would change into rage pretty quickly.’

Then what about you, Harry? Why are you the exception?

'Have you ever met Abraxas’ father?’ Harry said abruptly.

Tom barely blinked at the subject change. ‘Several times on the platform and twice when I went to his house.’

‘You went to his house?’

‘It was summer. Trust me, we weren’t *friends.’*

Harry's face became careful at once. 'Right,' he said. 'That makes sense.'

Harry didn't mention the orphanage that rested between them. A fight, waiting to happen, if only one of them *pushed.*

'He's your typical dissatisfied parent,' Tom continued. 'Very serious, very stern, only interested in politics and matters he deems important. Abraxas, of course, is a failure in his eyes. Belittled, even when I was in the room. That plays into his constant desire to please, I imagine.'

'Yeah,' Harry said quietly. 'That's awful.'

'There's worse,' Tom said. 'He wasn't *physically* abused.'

He waited to see if Harry would react, but he didn't.

Cupboard, Tom thought. They kept him in a *cupboard* and he feels sorry for Abraxas.

'I'm glad I never had family expectations.' Harry was stroking the scar on his hand, eyes on his empty plate.

'No,' Tom agreed, 'just Wizarding World ones.'

'It wasn't like that. Well, it was, *but* . . . '

'But?'

'It was life or death. People were dying and Voldemort chose me as his target. The papers made *me* their shiny mascot of hope. You don't know what it was like, living there. It was never a choice, not to me.'

Tom studied him for a second. Harry's eyes burned with conviction, as though willing Tom to understand. His self-sacrificing traits. His desire to save everyone else first and then finally think about himself. It was the opposite of human instinct. The opposite of self-preservation.

It was so disgustingly *Harry.*

'I never had anyone to really stay alive for either,' Harry said. 'And I know that sounds stupid because my death would *crush* Ron and Hermione but they knew it was a possibility. They knew just as much as I did what the cost could be. I didn't have a distraught family to leave behind or anything like that. They had all already died for the same cause I was fighting for. And — 'he blew out a breath. 'Why are we even *talking* about this?'

‘Boredom? All our other topics end in arguments?’

Harry flashed him a grin. ‘Only the personal ones. Like if I mentioned your absence of family, and how *that* worked out for you.’

Tom raised his eyebrows. ‘That’s the route you want to take?’

‘You clearly have never cared for anyone else in your life. You don’t think that is partly caused by your childhood?’

‘We are *not* talking about my childhood,’ Tom said.

Except that sounded weak. Vulnerable.

He kept his voice light. Masked it. ‘Not that there’s anything to talk about. A boring muggle orphanage with bad facilities and worse food. It’s about as pitiful as it sounds.’

One of the house-elves scurried over to them, a bony, frail thing with droopy ears and timid eyes. Tom watched the way Harry interacted with it: kindly, with a respect that went beyond politeness.

He thought of Conor Burke and the way his face had flushed when Harry smiled at him. Burke*,* a pampered little fifth year, who usually slipped under Tom’s radar.

‘How’s Conor?’ Tom said, his voice casual.

‘From the Slug Club?’ Harry raised his eyebrows. ‘Fine, I imagine. Oh, and you can’t murder him for talking to me.’

‘I’d call it stammering like an idiot but if you want to be more tactful . . . ‘

‘*Tom.’* There was a smile in Harry’s voice, despite it. ‘Are you jealous*?’*

'Why would I be jealous?’

‘Because he — ‘Harry realised the trap and gave him a dirty look.

Tom hid his grin.

‘You know what, you *should* be jealous,’ Harry said. ‘He seemed like the sort of person who has never murdered someone before. That immediately works in his favour.’

‘How boring of him.’

‘*And* he doesn’t want to take over the Wizarding World.’

‘Just mindlessly follow the movement, like a pathetic sheep.’

Harry smirked. He was so irritating sitting there, trying to *goad* him.

‘I could ruin Burke’s life in mere minutes if I wanted to,’ Tom said.

‘Then you’d have to admit you’re jealous.’

They looked at each other.

Harry’s lips were twitching. He met Tom’s eyes unwaveringly. *Challengingly*. For a second, Tom was struck by the impulse to lean across the table, grab a fistful of his robe and yank him closer. To feel Harry smirk against his mouth. The way he’d slacken, soft, instantly giving in.

Tom wanted to kiss him, which was completely ridiculous considering it wouldn’t lead anywhere. It was an absurd thought, bordering on sentimental.

‘Actually, I don’t fancy someone’s death on my hands. Especially an innocent fifth-year.’

Or maybe Tom just wanted him to shut up.

He resisted the urge and shook his head. ‘There are much more effective ways to make someone suffer than killing them.’

‘*Tom.’*

Tom smirked. ‘I’m joking.’

Maybe.

Harry brought Abraxas a stack of toast from the kitchens, which he accepted gratefully. With a bit of careful prodding, Harry dissected that Abraxas barely remembered the night before and didn't want to talk about the parts he did. He was quiet the rest of the day, claiming

a headache despite the hangover draught Alphard had provided. Harry knew better than to press.

Tom wanted to spend the day lounging around the common room reading; Abraxas, to stay cooped up in the dormitory, and Belinda, to wander the grounds, bundled in gloves and a scarf. Tom was not in the mood to talk when he was reading and, after finishing his homework, Harry decided to visit Dumbledore.

He made it to the third floor uninterrupted. Rounding a corner, Harry came face to face with Ron and Hermione. All three of them blanched in surprise. His friends were both carrying library books, bags swung over their shoulders.

Harry couldn't help looking at Ron. He felt like he had been punched in the stomach. Every second that ticked past only made it worse.

Ron was staring back at him, equally wary. Harry had become good at reading Ron's expressions but now his face was closed off. *Guarded.*

'Harry,' Hermione began nervously. She was glancing between the two of them. 'How're you?'

Ron scoffed. 'Seriously, Hermione? How's *he?'* There was tension in his voice, barely held together.

'Yes, Ron. You could have *some* manners. You haven't spoken to him in weeks.'

'No,' Harry said, meeting Ron's eyes steadily. 'I want to hear what he has to say.'

'Really, Harry, don't — '

Hermione faltered and bit her lip. Harry, however, continued to look at Ron.

'Yeah, Harry,' Ron began, 'how *are* you getting on? In between fucking Voldemort, of course. I'm sure everything's just *so* difficult for you.'

Harry stiffened at the venom in his tone but didn't say anything.

'It's true, isn't it? You are.*'* Ron shook his head and ignored Hermione when she pulled at his arm. 'And for god's sake, say something.'

'Like what? You *clearly* know everything about my life already. Go ahead then. Tell me how you can't stand to look at me.'

‘I can’t! Bloody hell, Harry, it’s like you don’t even care anymore. You’re always talking to him. Pretending like nothing happened — ‘

‘I *know* what happened and guess what? It’s gone. Sorry I’m not crying over the past like you.’

Ron flinched. ‘After everything he’s done — ‘

‘It’s not even your business. *I’ve* been more affected by Voldemort than you ever have. I know he’s a horrible person but you have to get over this whole future thing. He’s not the Voldemort we knew, not even close.’

‘But he wants to be! He will be, and you’ll allow it to happen — ‘

Harry reacted to the words like he had been cursed. ‘Is that what you think of me?’ he said quietly. ‘Do you actually think I’d allow Tom to *take over the Wizarding World?’*

‘So, you’ll what? Murder your boyfriend? Or get him a nice shiny cell in Azkaban?’

‘If that’s what it takes.’

Ron laughed disbelievingly. ‘You really are messed up, mate. Really fucking mental.’

‘Ron,’ Hermione began, though her voice was weak.

‘What? Can you explain his logic?’

‘She doesn’t need to explain my logic,’ Harry said. ‘It’s not that hard. Sure, he’s an awful fucking person but right now he’s not doing anything. It’s hypothetical. It might happen again, but let’s face it, everything we know is gone. I see him anyway. We’re in the same house. I don’t know why that’s so hard for you to understand — ‘

‘You’re fucking shagging him!’

‘What difference does that make? Really, *befriending* Riddle’s okay with you, but heaven forbid we have sex.’

‘It makes a difference and you know it!’

‘For you?’ Harry raised his eyebrows. ‘How does that work out? Considering the fact that you’ve barely spoken five words to *anyone* in Slytherin since September. But of course, you know best.’

‘Why would I want to talk to a bunch of Death Eaters? It makes no difference. He’s *killed* people. He wants to take over the Wizarding World. You decide none of this matters — ‘

‘Of course it matters. And it’s my problem, not yours! If I decide to carve the fucking *dark mark* into my skin it doesn’t concern you. So stop acting like you know anything about Slytherin or Tom Riddle — ‘

‘Harry!’ Hermione said, her voice cold. ‘He’s right, you know. It is messed up. And obviously, you can make your own choices, but you can’t expect us to condone them.’

‘I don’t.’

‘Then good,’ Ron spat. ‘Because we’re done.’

Harry flinched at the words, despite how he had expected them.

‘We’re not done,’ Hermione said. ‘And neither of you are walking away. Stop being stubborn idiots — ‘

‘I think it’s pretty easy, Hermione,’ Harry said. ‘Ron’s decided I’m some Slytherin Death Eater scumbag, and you think all of this can be *fixed.’*

He turned to look at Ron, and all the anger drained from his tone. ‘He’s not Voldemort. And if he was —if he was anything like the Voldemort we knew —then none of this would have happened in the first place. I’d *kill him* before that happened again.’

‘But you like him. You must. You’re always talking and laughing and acting like best mates. It’s mental.’

‘I know. I’m sorry. I know it’s crazy and stupid, but I don’t care anymore. It’s gone. Everything we know. All our lives, our memories. *Everything*. So why does it even matter what happens here? Why does anything matter anymore?’

Harry’s voice cracked at the end. He tried not to think about their time and the utter sense of emptiness it evoked. The sense that nothing mattered anymore because it was gone and it *hurt* and his whole life was stripped away.

‘Yeah,’ Ron said flatly. ‘But if this is how you cope with losing it all … I mean, *fuck,* Harry.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Harry said again. ‘It’s different now. It doesn’t make it better or excuse it but it’s — different.’

‘So, you’d really kill him?’ Hermione sounded sceptical. Harry didn’t blame her.

‘Yes,’ he said. *No matter what it did to him.* ‘I’m not on his side. I never have been. But it’s more complicated than that. I can hate one part of him and not let it be everything. It hasn’t even happened yet —it’s just a far-off possibility.’

Harry bit back the urge to ramble on. They would never truly understand Tom, and maybe that was for the best. It was better to be steadfast than uncertain; better to never know the good parts and have none of the struggle.

‘It’s still a deal-breaker though,’ Ron said. ‘He’s still a murderous *prick.’*

‘I know,’ Harry said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Well, too bad,’ Ron said. ‘*We* both see him as Voldemort, and obviously that’s different for you but it’s not for me. Just looking at you right now makes me mad. I don’t understand how you like him.’

‘Well, when I look at you, I think of everything that happened. Every horrible thing that was my fault. The fact that your lives are ruined and I *failed.* Do you think that’s easy?’

‘Maybe we should stay away from each other then,’ Ron said. ‘If neither of us can look at each other.’

‘No, I didn’t — ‘Harry began. The rest of the sentence lodged in his throat. It burned.

‘See you around, mate,’ Ron said, and with one final look back, moved past him down the corridor.

The thought of visiting Dumbledore had soured. The common room, too, brought no pleasure. Harry wandered the castle absently until the sting of the interaction faded.

He had argued with Ron before. Usually over less serious things. Arguments he had always known they would make up from. None of them brought the gut-deep uncertainty. The spreading feeling of numbness. The ice-cold, gripping *fear*.

And yet, despite it all, why did *Ron* have to act like it affected him? He and Hermione never cared about all the times that Harry had spoken to Tom; every time they believed them to be friends. *There* it had been Harry's life. His decisions. But now . . .

The thoughts rattled through his head, over and over again. The guilt came back. The flashing thought that if he *did* end his relationship with Tom, maybe they'd forgive him. Maybe.

And Harry would be miserable. Still in Slytherin House, pretending he could ignore Tom, nothing changing.

When he had exhausted himself agonising through the possibilities, Harry went back to the common room. It was over. He had made up his mind. The uncertainty — the twisting mass of confliction and guilt — wasn't something he would come back to.

Abraxas was no longer in the dormitory but sitting near the fireplace practising conjuration. Harry pulled open the door to find Tom leaning against his headboard, reading a book.

Harry spared him a look and made his way to the bathroom. His gut twisted when he looked at Tom, sharp like a knife. Ron's words were an echo in his ears, bringing a flurry of mixed emotions. He didn't know which was the most prominent one until he forced his feet back to the dorm. What was he doing, *hiding?*

'Did you run into your friends again?' Tom said. He sat on the bed, watching him.

Harry felt the words like an electric shock. 'Yeah,' he said, and for lack of anything else to do, flung himself down on his bed. The thought of closing the curtains drifted weakly into his mind but Harry couldn't stomach Tom knowing that he was affected in any way.

They were quiet for a moment. Harry stared at the ceiling with all its patterns and cracks. He could hear his heart thumping steadily in his chest. It almost seemed like he was alone.

'I used to dream about the Weasleys,' Tom said then. 'I always wondered about that. Your supposed family.'

Harry didn't say anything. He stilled at the words, breath catching.

'There were about twenty gingers around one table,' Tom said. 'And I'd have this sense — this tentative sort of optimism. As though you couldn't quite believe you were there and were scared of everything crumbling. And I wondered *why*, that your supposed family, would bring this feeling of caution. As though you were a guest, hoping to not outstay your welcome. That was the first clue.'

Harry sat up and looked at him. Tom didn't seem like he wanted to argue but the words were too personal. Too intrusive.

'Well, I used to dream about your orphanage,' Harry said. 'Wools, right? It's so *muggle.'*

The silence following the words was thick. Tom's eyes hardened at once. 'Have I touched a nerve?'

'If you want to dissect everything in my life, then I'm talking all I want about yours. And believe me, I know a *lot.'*

'Go ahead. I always like to hear about Voldemort.'

Harry felt a rush of anger at the words. It was like someone had pressed a finger into an open wound, not caring how much it hurt.

'Your orphan friends thought you were a freak. You were so *scared* when Dumbledore visited you— is that why you hate him so much? He didn't want you stealing from the others? Or was it because you were no longer unique and special?'

Tom's face seemed to shut off until all that remained was something emotionless. 'I *was* unique. They knew it and were scared of me. But you, Harry, you didn't grow up in an orphanage or even with the Weasleys. And we both know I killed your parents.'

'So I had relatives. And unlike you, I didn't murder them.'

'Well, maybe you should have. Didn't they lock you in a cupboard?'

Harry stiffened. 'At least I'm not scarred by it. Unlike you, I grew up with muggles and I don't hate them all.'

'I'm not *scarred,'* he hissed. 'They disgust me. They're inferior. Weak.'

'Because they don't have magic? Was that what you thought when you went and killed your family?'

‘You don’t have a clue what they were like,’ Tom said. His voice was cold. ‘You have no *idea.’*

‘Did they not want you?’ Harry shook his head. ‘After you spent so long looking for them? How *sad.* Get over it, Tom.’

The air between them felt cold. Everything did. Harry glanced at the floor and saw thick shards of ice protruding through the floorboards. The temperature dropped. Tom’s wand wasn’t in his hands and he looked slightly surprised.

‘I’m sorry,’ Harry said immediately. ‘I didn’t mean…’

He wondered why he suddenly cared. Why the reaction brought no pleasure. Why he instantly wanted to take it back.

‘They were nothing,’ Tom said flatly. ‘*Muggles.* Useless, pathetic muggles and if you think I cared — ‘

‘I know.’

‘You’d know a lot about not being wanted, Harry. The great saviour of the Wizarding World, kept in a cupboard by muggles. Even the Weasleys didn’t want you, and your friends definitely don’t anymore.’

Harry jolted. He knew Tom would get defensive at the way his magic had reacted. Knew he’d become *mean.*

‘You don’t have a clue about anything,’ Harry said. ‘You’re guessing.’

‘But it’s true, isn’t it? You lived with muggles. Why is it that no-one in the Wizarding World took you in?’

Harry said nothing. A stone had lodged in his chest. He felt slightly sick.

‘*Dumbledore,’* Tom breathed. ‘That’s just brilliant. What did the old fool say? It would be less dangerous for you? It was a necessary precaution?’

‘I don’t expect you to understand the concept of caring.’

‘Caring?’ He laughed. ‘Were you suitably pampered? Did Dumbledore keep you safe and secure?’

‘This isn’t his fault — ‘

‘How so? When he sent you back there every summer, despite everything?’

‘Just like Dippet did to you then, Tom. After you *begged* him to stay at Hogwarts.’

A muscle jumped in Tom’s jaw and Harry braced himself. Nothing came. They stared at each other for a second, neither moving. The air was stifling. Harry’s muscles were all tensed in expectancy.

‘Why did you have to bring up the Weasleys anyway?’ Harry said. ‘You just can’t help it, can you?’

‘You lied about them.’

‘And you lied about everything. Do you think I’m going to feel bad? You want to pick and pick until you get a reaction. Two can play that game and I *know you.’*

‘Evidently not well enough.’

Harry said nothing. Why did they always go too far? Always ripping into each other, knowing exactly what would hurt.

‘I shouldn’t have brought up the Weasleys,’ Tom said. ‘But still, you got very prickly over it.’

‘Because you know I’ve been fighting with Ron. You know I don’t want to talk about it but you can’t resist. You never can.’

‘Every time you see them, you get defensive. As though I’m to blame for your choices. Why not speed it up a bit? You’re going to ignore me and dwell over it anyway.’

‘It’s not easy when they remind me of how ridiculous this whole thing is. How it’s going to end and I’m a horrible person and you want to become *Voldemort* — ‘

Harry stopped. Tom was sitting on the edge of his bed now, facing him.

‘You’re not a horrible person,’ Tom said.

‘We both know that’s what you want to become. You want to leave school, make more horcruxes and take over the Wizarding World.’

‘You’ve always known it.’

‘I know.’ Harry swallowed at the weight of Tom’s gaze. ‘If you make six horcruxes, you’ll become unhinged. It doesn’t work like you think it does. The fact that seven is the most powerful number doesn’t increase your abilities or let you conquer death any further.’

‘How do I know you’re not lying?’ Tom studied him, as though he would be able to tell from Harry’s face. ‘Anyway, you already know what objects my horcruxes are. I have to make more.’

‘In case I destroy them.’

‘Which is what you want to do. Isn’t that your real plan after school? Defeating me?’

‘You could just not try and take over the Wizarding World.’

Tom hummed doubtfully. ‘I could read your mind, you know. Or one of your friends. Find out what objects I chose in the past and make sure I don’t pick the same.’

Harry stiffened and met his eyes. ‘Go on,’ he said. ‘Try it and see what happens.’

Tom’s eyes were dark and curious but no longer angry. Harry thought of Voldemort, with his scarlet irises and cat-like pupils. He wondered if it would happen again, the cycle repeating before his very eyes.

‘Voldemort survived a killing curse,’ Tom said, ‘despite this supposed state of weakness he was in.’

Harry's shoulders loosened at the way Tom hadn’t pressed. ‘And? Doesn’t one horcrux make you immortal? Why not guard it better? Stop being so *paranoid?’*

Tom smiled. ‘Because while you know what they are, they’re never truly safe.’

‘That’s rubbish and you know it.’

‘How so? You want to prevent my plans from happening again. *Defeat* me. You and I, just like the prophecy said.’

‘God, you’re so dramatic. The prophecy doesn’t exist anymore.’

‘Still — it was always meant to be that way, wasn’t it? Us in the end.’ He smiled. ‘I’d prefer it to anyone else. You can *try* and kill me. I’m sure it will make for an exciting final reunion.’

Harry gave him a withering look. ‘You’re so sure you’ll win.’

‘Of course. It’s my *life*. I can’t doubt it now. Everything I have — everything I am— is built around that idea. You know what it's like to devote yourself to a single purpose.’

Harry shifted in place. ‘Power,’ he said. ‘It’s not the ambition I care about, it’s the *means*. The murder and the way muggleborns were treated. The beliefs. The ideology. You wanted to reinvent the Wizarding World based around a rooted prejudice. A life generated by fear.’

‘There wouldn't be violence if people didn’t resist.’ Tom shook his head. ‘We’re not going to agree,’ he said. ‘You know that. Why argue about it now?’

He said it lightly, full of conviction, and Harry was tired of arguing about the same things; tired of the same old conflicts awakening when he spoke to his friends or cast back his mind. It was going to end one day. But what was the point doing it now? Why did it have to be *today?*

Harry blew out a breath. ‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to argue again.’

Not after Ron. Not after everything.

‘You know, Harry, when I read Ron’s mind, he was so protective of you. It was so deeply ingrained in him. Even overpowering his fear, his revulsion, was this loyalty towards you. A feeling like that can’t evaporate so easily.’

‘Ron was also hopelessly in the dark back then.’

‘Still — aren’t you all he has? You and Granger, those sickening, steadfast friends? Even if he was furious —betrayed— wouldn’t there still be a connection of sorts?’

Harry looked at him for a long moment. ‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘But you don’t understand the weight of it. How deep his hatred of you is. Ron lost so many family members in the war. He grew up with so many stories, so much *fear*. He wouldn’t even say Voldemort’s name, for god’s sake.’

Tom — while probably pleased that his name could instil such fear — didn’t say anything. Harry could almost feel his itch to ask. His desire to know, so strong it sparked in the air.

‘Did you ever really live with the Weasleys? Or just your muggle relatives?’

His tone was mild. Curious.

‘I’d have to spend part of the summer with the Dursleys,’ Harry said. ‘That was their name, by the way. Something about protective wards. Dumbledore, you know.’

‘How shocking.’

‘I know. But with Voldemort’s supporters, the Wizarding World wasn’t exactly safe. And I’d be putting others in danger, which is worse than having a shitty summer.’

Harry chewed his lip. He wondered if Tom would bristle if he asked a question. Would the peace between them instantly shatter.

‘When you found your family,’ Harry said carefully, ‘did you always set out to kill them?’

‘Only when I saw what they were. Not so much muggles but pathetic. Rich and snobbish and living in luxury. My father — ‘his face twisted. ‘He was nothing like me.’

Harry could fill in the blanks. Imagine the disappointment. The rage at how a lifelong goal had fizzled and been stamped out. A desire effectively shut down. Perhaps a childhood longing. The obsession with his parentage.

And Tom, of course, also blamed his father for abandoning him. Casting away his dying mother. Dumping him in an orphanage.

Harry knew he couldn’t reveal the truth, at least not then. There was something careful in Tom’s tone, beneath the forced nonchalance, and if he pressed too much …

‘I always wondered about my father,’ Harry said instead. ‘Everyone told me how great he was. How *similar* we were. And then I saw a memory and he was nothing like I’d always imagined. He was a bully. He grew out of it but ... I’ll never really know the truth.’

‘You could always meet him,’ Tom said. ‘If he’s born again.’

Harry stopped. The thought had never occurred to him and for a second, he couldn’t speak.

Hope, possibility, longing. But could he really watch everything play out differently before his eyes? Really *meet them*, knowing a separate life, separate memories?

‘Maybe,’ Harry said, clearing his throat. ‘We look really similar though. I'd have to alter my appearance.’

‘Don’t want to terrify him,’ Tom said. ‘That’s what I did to my father. It worked brilliantly.’

Harry laughed, grateful Tom had broken the tension. For a while they sat there, both on the edges of their beds, only a stretch of floor between them. The ice was slowly melting and the puddles shone in the light.

Harry thought of all the things he could say and all the things he already had. It wasn’t as tense as he imagined. Not as regretful. The weight of the conversation didn’t hang between them, but hovered lightly, temporarily placated.

Harry looked at Tom and felt something tighten in his chest, something right near his heart. It was such a rush of bittersweet emotion, such *fondness,* that he felt overwhelmed.

‘I’m going to see how Abraxas is,’ Harry said. ‘We have the match tomorrow. He always gets stressed.’

‘Yeah,’ Tom said and glanced up. ‘Or you could stay here.’

They looked at each other and neither of them moved. Harry swallowed. Hummed as if considering the decision, though both of them knew he wasn’t.

‘Okay,’ he said, and stood up to move to Tom’s bed, who instantly shifted aside to make room.

Their legs brushed together. A second passed and Tom leaned forward, pausing, inches away. When he kissed him, it was with a sort of lazy curiosity, as though he had been waiting to do it all day. Eyes closed to the sensation, Harry reached up to brush Tom’s cheek and slowly, blocking the rest of it out, kissed him back.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to anyone reading/rereading this fic! I am not in the right headspace to respond to comments right now, but I

really appreciate them, and I will do so in the future! Anyway, much love ❤

Intimacy

Chapter Notes

> I am so deeply sorry for disappearing. I will try to post the rest of the fic this week

Harry woke on Sunday morning to the sound of Abraxas' voice. It was still dark. From outside his curtains came the squeak of the broken floorboard as Abraxas paced back and forth. Harry found his glasses on the nightstand. His wand. The familiar fog of sleep was starting to fade.

Abraxas' voice was muffled from behind the curtains and came in snatches.

'... I told you, he's not coming. It doesn't matter anymore, Alphard.'

Alphard —who sounded enough like Sirius to still sometimes catch Harry unaware —said, 'start *caring*. It's for Slytherin, not you and your father. It's our match, so stop moping about it.'

Abraxas didn't respond to that. Rather than endure the strained silence, Harry pulled back his curtains and got up.

'Oh, there you are,' Abraxas said, voice melting with relief. 'We have the pitch booked for seven. *Alphard* thinks we need practice before the match.'

Harry rubbed his eyes. At this time of the year, the grounds would be pitch-black.

Alphard was dressed in Quidditch gear, broomstick in his hand. He briskly nodded to Harry in greeting, ignoring Abraxas who was still half-dressed.

'I think practising will use up all our energy,' Abraxas tried again. He was fidgety. Restless. Pacing.

Alphard regarded him flatly for a second. 'Stop making so much noise,' he said. 'You'll wake the others.'

Abraxas glanced at Harry. Both of them did.

Harry frowned slightly, raising his eyebrows. They were definitely

thinking about Tom. *'What*?'

'Nothing,' Alphard said, regarding him with curious grey eyes. He put his broom over his shoulder. 'Now, both of you hurry up. We still have to wake the fifth-years.'

By eight o'clock, the sky was pale pink and the sun was rising steadily over the Forbidden Forest, painting the Quidditch Pitch golden. The mood between the team had sobered. After an hour of discussion in the changing room, Abraxas wasn't the only one feeling nervous.

When the stands began to fill with students, the Hufflepuffs appeared. Everyone was cold and awake and hyper-alert. As the whistle blew and they kicked into the air, Harry scanned the crowd, which was predominantly a blur of yellow and black, though the Slytherin quarter was garnished with their own house colours. The sound of thunderous applause boomed in his ears. The wind whistled and whipped around.

Harry's eyes raked over the Gryffindors. The seventh years. The cheerful, red-nosed faces, bundled in scarfs and hats. Some he recognised, others he didn't.

Ron and Hermione hadn't turned up.

It shouldn't have hurt. It shouldn't have felt like he had lost his hold on his broomstick and all the air knocked from his lungs. That he was falling, falling, falling, to the beckoning green of the pitch.

Harry squeezed his knuckles around the broomstick and focused on the snitch.

They lost the match by forty points.

The Hufflepuff Seeker was Mad-Eye Moody's friend, Diggory. He looked nothing like Cedric, with curly brown hair and a face covered in freckles. They had spent so long looking for the snitch that Diggory made attempts at conversation, but it was impossible to hear with the wind.

Below, Hufflepuff were so far in the lead that the match was becoming increasingly bleak. Their stand drowned out the noise — *eighty-twenty, ninety, one hundred points, one hundred and fifty in the lead …*

It was the longest quidditch match Harry had ever played and even the stands were restless. When he finally saw the snitch — a glint of gold, so fast and quick it could have been a trick of the light — he lunged towards it and ended the torturous ordeal.

Shaking Diggory's hand and congratulating him, Harry made his way to the showers in a daze.

They had lost.

Under the lukewarm spray, he listened to a heated argument between the chasers. He thought of Viktor Krum and how much this situation reminded him of the Quidditch World Cup. That train of thought caused his insides to ache in a way that had nothing to do with the match.

They trudged through the damp grass. Harry tried to talk to Alphard, who was marching ahead of everyone else, jaw clenched. He knew none of his words would soothe the frustration that came with losing the match, however; knew there was no consolation to the crashing disappointment it brought. After telling Alphard they could still beat Gryffindor in such a way that ensured the house cup, Harry left him to lick his wounds.

In the common room, a tentative cheer started up, ending when Alphard stalked up to the dormitory. From where he stood, Harry heard the door slam and the silence that followed.

'Good job my father didn't turn up,' Abraxas said. 'But he'll hear about this anyway. It was such a *joke.'* His hair was wet and slick against his forehead. The wind had left his nose red.

'We can still win the cup,' Harry tried. 'They're forty points ahead. If we train hard and beat Gryffindor next time ...'

Abraxas shrugged. ‘I don’t care anymore. And hey, at least you ended it. I don’t know what I’d have done if they caught the snitch as well.’

Harry winced at the thought. ‘We would never recover the points. At least this way we still can.’

‘You’re awfully optimistic, aren’t you?’

Harry shrugged. ‘*Someone* has to be. And it could have been worse.’

‘Yeah,’ Abraxas said doubtfully. ‘If Slughorn comes here, will you distract him for me?’

‘What should I do? Tell him some sob story about Grindelwald?’

‘He’d like that,’ Abraxas said, nodding. ‘Sluggy loves hardship.’

Abraxas, after scanning the common room, said he was going to lie down. Hoping it wouldn’t escalate into a fight with Alphard and knowing there was no way he could prevent it, Harry waved him off.

The common room was tense, the after-effects of the loss lingering in the air. The team had trickled off to their separate friend groups, or — following Alphard and Abraxas’ example—went to mope in the dorms.

Harry found Tom.

‘Well, that was embarrassing,’ Tom said, by way of greeting. ‘You played admirably, of course. The rest of the team was a disaster.’

‘The Beaters were alright,’ Harry said, slumping down on the sofa beside him. The commentary was still ringing in his ears.

‘Were they? You let in *twenty-two* goals.’

‘When did you become such a Quidditch fanatic? I thought you hate the game.’

‘It *is* foolish.’ Tom shrugged. ‘I was talking to Slughorn in the stands. He booed every time Hufflepuff let in a goal. All twenty-two times.’

Harry laughed at the thought. ‘At least he’s enthusiastic. Slughorn’s probably the most committed Head of House I’ve ever seen. He really cares for you.’

‘Us,’ Tom reminded. ‘And is that so? Better than your beloved

Dumbledore?'

'I don't know,' Harry said. 'Dumbledore wasn't Head of Gryffindor when I was there. But probably. I don't think *they* have regular parties.'

'Definitely not,' Tom said. 'Perhaps he has a knitting club or something.'

'Or go ten-pin bowling,' Harry said, which made Tom frown. 'Never mind.'

Tom wouldn't know about Dumbledore's future chocolate frog card and Harry didn't reveal it. Allowing Tom to imagine *why* Harry knew that piece of information was much more amusing.

'You and Dumbledore were very close then?'

'Not really. We just shared a mutual hatred of Voldemort. I don't think our interactions centred around anything else.'

Except here, he thought. *This* Dumbledore had taught him Occlumency. He wasn't the Headmaster but a Transfiguration teacher. He had nothing to do with Harry's past or responsibilities.

'Anyway,' Harry said, clearing his throat and leaning his head against the sofa. On his dive for the snitch, he had skimmed a Bludger and his right arm rippled with pain. 'How does Abraxas usually take a Quidditch loss?'

Badly.

Harry went to see his friend in the dormitory, who was lying stretched out on his four-poster, staring blankly at the ceiling. They spent a while slandering the Hufflepuff chasers, Harry mainly listening and occasionally making sounds of agreement to the heated rants. Abraxas perked up after getting that off his chest, and when Harry suggested dinner, even agreed to facing the Great Hall.

The atmosphere was still tense between the Slytherins, and Harry weakly tried to take Abraxas' mind off it with an array of increasingly hopeless topics. This fell apart when Belinda's family owl swooped

gracefully through the open windows, dropping a letter over the table. Before it landed in her dinner, Belinda snatched it up.

Across from her, Abraxas froze, leaning forward to watch her tear it open.

Harry and Tom traded a quick look. Belinda's eyes were making their way down the page, never widening, pausing, or showing any sign of emotion. When she was finished, she folded the letter in half and placed it in her robe pocket.

'Are you okay?' Abraxas said. His voice was softer than Harry had ever heard — so thick with concern that Harry felt like he was invading something private.

'Yes,' Belinda said. She picked up her fork and continued to eat, ignoring the way they were watching her.

Harry turned away to give them some privacy.

'Well, my parents want me home for Christmas,' Belinda said suddenly. 'They said it will be the last time I see them until the wedding. They're leaving the country. Taking Claudia too, of course.'

Abraxas stiffened. Belinda pretended not to notice his reaction, dicing her chicken into small, precise pieces.

'I guess father was too close to Grindelwald,' Belinda continued. 'He's probably looking at Azkaban if he stays, reading between the lines. Anyway, I marry Arnoldo in the spring. I don't know if I'll see her — them — after that.'

'Can't you...' Abraxas began. 'Do *something?'*

Her smile was bitter. 'Like what? Send him to prison? How long do you think that would last? Arnoldo *owns* Azkaban.'

'You could get him murdered,' Tom said.

Harry shot him a quick look which he ignored. Tom was watching her raptly, voice as calm as if they were talking about the weather.

'Then Claudia — 'she shook her head. 'No.'

The look Tom and Belinda shared was hard to decipher. It was something generated from seven years of history; both apprehensive and intuitive. A look that was half a promise, half a threat.

Belinda picked up her fork and dropped her eyes.

‘Well, that’s unfortunate,’ Tom said. ‘Such a shame that they follow Grindelwald.’

Harry heard it in the air: the barely-veiled tension. That *you* follow Grindelwald, he thought. *And not me.*

He wondered would Tom ever forgive Belinda for plotting behind his back. What she’d have to do to get back on his side. Or was her place as a Death Eater severed forever?

Tom’s eyes were unfocused. He was thinking about something, Harry knew, something *bad* judging by the tension around his jaw.

Belinda continued to eat her dinner, in slow, careful bites. Abraxas watched her, hawk-like, and Harry’s eyes wandered between all three of them, wondering what he could do to diffuse the situation.

As dinner wore on, many Slytherins left the table. At their side of the hall, Hufflepuff were celebrating exuberantly, clinking goblets and singing at the top of their lungs. None of the professors told them to lower their voices, though Professor Slughorn was watching reproachfully, gripping his wine glass harder than usual.

Belinda was quiet the rest of the day. Abraxas was making a poor attempt at cheering her up, and as the evening wore on, she became more and more annoyed.

‘Who knows when they’ll vanish,’ Belinda finally snapped. ‘There’s nothing I can do anyway. They have Claudia. One little apparition and I could never see her again if I don’t behave.’

‘Well, maybe my father — ‘Abraxas began, undeterred by her tone. ‘Maybe he could figure something out — ‘

‘Your father hates me,’ Belinda said. ‘And my family are a disgrace. Let’s not kid ourselves.’ She tucked her feet beneath her, staring into the flames of the common room fire.

‘What about a fidelius?’ Harry suggested. ‘Temporarily. Then they wouldn't need to flee the country. *Or* you could use it to hide your

sister.'

This made them pause.

'The fidelius charm?' Belinda repeated, turning her head slowly towards him.

'Isn't that *really* advanced magic?' Abraxas said.

Harry shrugged. 'I think so. But still, I know someone who could cast it.'

Belinda bit her bottom lip and smoothed out her robe. 'You mean Dumbledore.'

'Yes.'

'No. No way. My family and Dumbledore, and Grindelwald — 'she grimaced. 'I'm finished relying on other people.' With those words, she stood up, glanced at Abraxas and said she was going to the library.

Jumping from his seat, he scrambled after her.

When they both disappeared, Tom turned to Harry. He had paused at the words, listening to the conversation with no intention of joining in. 'He did it in the future, didn't he?' Tom said. 'Cast the fidelius charm?'

'Yes,' Harry said, and not wanting to divulge the information about Godric's Hollow and the horrible end that had come to his parents, added, 'it was for a secret headquarters.'

Tom's eyes brightened with realisation. 'That's why the location's never clear in your dreams.'

Harry blinked at him. 'It isn't?'

'It's blurry. I thought, perhaps, your attention to detail was poor but now it seems like the spell is so strong that even your subconscious resists revealing it.'

'That's interesting,' Harry said. 'I always used to worry that you'd find out something through a dream. I guess it doesn't matter anymore.'

Tom stared into the flickering flames of the fire and then turned to him. 'I saw Voldemort once,' he said. 'He was just a lone figure in a dark robe. But the feeling he evoked — I know now that it couldn't

have been anyone else.'

'Except a version of yourself? That's awfully conceited.'

'I *am* awfully conceited. Or so you like to say.'

Harry hummed. 'I've been trying to suppress the thought of Voldemort ever since this dream-sharing situation. Maybe that worked to an extent?'

'What, your will for me *not* to know is greater than our connection?'

'Maybe,' Harry said. 'I *really* didn't want you to find out.'

To the degree that he suppressed it all, tamped it down, not allowing it out. Locked it away somewhere even he couldn't access. Allowed the line between Tom and Voldemort to blur and distort. And when it came flooding out, tattered the edges, forever changed?

Tom knowing about Voldemort was surreal. Surreal and — freeing.

' You wouldn't like seeing Voldemort,' Harry said. 'Trust me.'

He wasn't sure how they ended up in the dormitory. Tom was sprawled on his bed, lazily leafing through a textbook. Harry — thankful for the quiet, relaxed atmosphere — inspected the bruise on his bicep. The Bludger had hit him harder than he first thought, and the upper portion of his arm was swollen and mottled blue. Harry pressed it cautiously, but apart from a flare of pain, it had no effect. Wincing, he pulled down his sleeve.

'What are you reading?' Harry said, glancing over at Tom. 'Seven ways to disembowel your enemies? Or just your diary?'

'There are more than seven ways to disembowel someone.' Tom shut his book with a snap. 'And I didn't write in the diary. Do you *really* think I'd leave it out in the open when you know what it is?'

'I'm not going to destroy it,' Harry said, frowning at the idea. 'That opportunity has long passed anyway. And where would I get basilisk venom?'

‘You’ve clearly given it some thought.’

Feeling the tension that had suddenly crept between them, Harry stood up and grinned. ‘If you don’t write in the diary, then why’s it personalised? You wouldn't put your soul piece in any old book.’

‘I didn’t use it as an *actual diary.’*

At Tom's defensive face, Harry laughed. ‘You just poured your whole heart and soul into it,’ he said.

Tom stood up so they were facing each other. ‘The diary is a means of opening the Chamber of Secrets again. It has all my memories of fifth-year carefully planted into it.’

‘*Recorded* into it,’ Harry said.

‘It’s a tool.’ He grabbed Harry’s wrist, as though the physical contact would shut him up. ‘I thought you had experience with what it can do.’

‘Oh, I know perfectly,’ Harry said, meeting Tom’s eyes. He didn’t care about the Chamber of Secrets then — only the insatiable urge to get under Tom’s skin. ‘But it doesn’t explain why you’re so defensive.’

The dormitory lights were dim. Evening. The Lake a murky shadow through the round windows. Harry could feel the pressure of Tom’s fingers on his wrist. The way his breath was warm against his face. How his eyes were so bright and maddeningly intense.

‘I’m defensive because it holds my soul,’ Tom said. His voice had changed into something soft, barely above a murmur. ‘My *soul,* Harry. An entire half of it.’

‘From you, that means nothing. Your soul’s probably a twisted, shrivelled mass of dark magic.’

For some reason, that made Tom laugh. His eyes — locked on Harry’s face —burned. ‘Is that how your interactions with my horcruxes went?’ He smiled slightly. ‘What a shame. They could have been a lot more … interesting.’

Tom’s voice dropped. His smile was a wicked thing, and Harry wanted to laugh but the sound lodged in his throat.

His eyes flickered to Tom’s lips. ‘Your horcruxes weren’t even

corporeal,' Harry said. 'Not that I'm against ghost sex or anything — *joking,* oh my god — '

Tom smiled against Harry's mouth, half-exasperated, half-amused. Harry's hands jumped to the nape of Tom's neck, pulling him closer. It was familiar now. The press of his lips, the feel of skin against his own. Easy.

Pulling away for a second, Harry locked the dormitory door. Tom watched the display of Parseltongue appreciatively and then yanked Harry forward into another searing kiss.

'We need a better place to have sex,' Harry began, even as his fingers made quick work of his robe. 'Every time I think of someone trying the door — '

'You worry too much.' Tom tossed aside his tie, moving to the bed and pulled Harry forward. 'But definitely. Abraxas barely looks me in the eye anymore, and it's not out of fear.'

Harry grinned. '*Alphard* gave me the weirdest look this morning. Like he was surprised to find me sleeping in my own bed.'

Tom scoffed, yanking off his robe. '*Alphard,'* he said, so distastefully that Harry laughed.

'Why do you hate Alphard?'

Tom didn't answer. He pushed Harry's chest, who landed flat on his back against the mattress. Tom immediately moved forward, leaning over him.

'You could have just told me to shut up,' Harry began, observing Tom warily but making no effort to move.

Tom's eyes were dark and unfocused. They flickered absently to Harry's mouth, which already felt swollen, and then to his eyes. Harry had seen him so many times now — they had done this at least a dozen — and yet still his heart quickened.

'Shut up then,' Tom said, leaning forward to press his lips to Harry's jaw.

Harry tilted his chin back, feeling Tom's teeth graze the delicate skin there. His head was swimming and Tom's patience was a wicked thing. A *cruel* thing, only made more blatant by the smile toying at his

lips. Sinful and dark and promising so many devastating things.

'Tom,' Harry said, fingers brushing over Tom's shoulder blades. Tom's lips were making their way back to his mouth torturously slowly, but instead of kissing him, he just hovered there.

'Yes, Harry?' Tom's knee brushed Harry's cock, which was so hard it felt painful and Harry hitched a breath.

'We should hurry up or someone might try the door.'

Tom's nose wrinkled. That close, he looked rather endearing, the frustration blatant on his face, which was scrunched up at the reminder.

Harry reached out a finger to brush Tom's lip, feeling warm. A thrill went through his hand. He could touch Tom. Whenever he wanted. Brain muggy at the realisation, Harry leaned forward and kissed him lightly.

Tom froze for a second, perhaps at the softness, and then wrapped his fingers tightly in Harry's hair.

It quickly became heated. While still kissing him, Tom's fingers wandered along Harry's chest. Paused, just below his navel. Harry made a little noise in his throat, trying in vain to suppress it. Tom's fingers *brushed* his cock, and when Harry reached to return the favour, he batted him away.

Right, Harry thought, *Tom wanted to control things today.*

The realisation made his heart spike — fearful and indignant and still somehow heady — but then Tom was stroking him off, and Harry forgot about the loss of control. He shifted his hips upwards to give Tom better access, complying easily to the unspoken dynamic change.

Tom hummed in satisfaction against Harry's mouth, tugging his bottom lip between his teeth.

Harry bit back another whine. He jerked into Tom's hand, unable to bottle a groan.

'Harry,' Tom began, voice scratchy. He planted a kiss lightly at the corner of Harry's mouth, who wasn't fooled by the tenderness of the gesture. Tom's eyes *gleamed.* ' Do you want to — '

He didn't need to finish the sentence. Harry's heart stuttered in his chest. It froze right in place. Everything did. Tom wasn't expecting him to say yes. His tone was absent, the question posed like a second thought. Tom was already kissing him again, as if to forestall the inevitable rejection, fingers cupping Harry's jaw, lightly stroking along the back of his neck.

Harry pulled back a fraction. 'Alright.'

His voice was odd. Nervous. Stiff. Practically falling apart.

'Alright,' Harry said again, more certain this time. 'Why not? It can't be worse than anything else we do.'

Tom stared at him, the surprise on his face so apparent that Harry glanced away, cheeks flaring. He could feel the burn of Tom's eyes drinking in his flushed face; the heat of his breath from where he had paused an inch away. Feel the way Tom took in the acceptance, momentarily stunned.

Then Tom's eyes cleared.

'If I hate it — 'Harry began.

'You won't hate it.'

'—we are *never* doing this again.'

Tom's lips quirked at the vehemence. 'Okay,' he said, thumbing over the head of Harry's dick.

Harry's pulse was hammering now, no matter how much he willed it to calm down. He was more aware of Tom than he had ever been before—aware of those long fingers, wrapped around his cock, moving up and down steadily; aware of Tom's mouth pressed lightly against his neck. Tom's expression hidden from view.

The realisation was pounding through Harry's body, thundering in his mind. Alighting every nerve, every sense, making his chest lurch and contract and squeeze. Was this the worst mistake of his life? Or was it inevitable, with how things had progressed?

'I can practically hear you overthinking,' Tom said.

Harry shifted back to look at him properly. He scanned Tom's face, searching for something, beneath the heat in his eyes and the corners

of his upturned mouth. He found it.

Apprehension.

Subtle and yet more pronounced by the second. An uncertainty that lurked in Tom's eyes, only visible now because of their proximity. It felt like a confirmation. Harry's shoulders loosened — something unspoken passed between them — and he exhaled raggedly. The ever-building tension inside him eased.

'I'm not overthinking,' Harry tried half-heartedly. He raised his eyebrows, forcing some nonchalance into his voice. 'So, are we having sex or what?'

Tom didn't look fooled by the display of indifference but didn't say anything either.

'Obviously.' His voice had all the confidence Harry had wished for in his own. For a second, he was envious of Tom's flawless control.

Then Tom changed his pace and all that fell away. Harry made a noise at the pressure. Blocked out his nerves, his unease, and focused on nothing but the sensation. He wouldn't show Tom he was nervous. He wouldn't betray any of the doubt that was surely visible.

Harry gasped, pressing his forehead against Tom's. The dormitory was half-bathed in shadows now, and they were on Tom's bed — *Tom's* — his trunk less than a metre away. *Tom Riddle* was giving him a handjob. They were pressed against each other, all slick skin and heat. There was a smile playing around Tom's lips, small and lazy and sly.

Harry's hips twitched again, and he held back another desperate noise. He would come if Tom didn't slow down. Come with those slender fingers wrapped around his cock, and Tom's breath fanning hot near his ear. Come —

Abruptly, the pressure disappeared.

Harry made an annoyed noise in his throat. 'Tom,' he began.

Tom only hummed. 'What, dear?'

Harry bit back the rest of his sentence. Schooled his face into some semblance of composure. 'Nothing,' he said, as lightly as he could.

Tom snorted and removed his hand from Harry's cock entirely. He

shifted backwards on the bed and glanced at him briefly. His hair was hanging into his eyes, which were indecipherable.

Harry frowned, raising his eyebrows expectantly. ‘What are you — ‘

Oh.

Harry stopped breathing.

No way, he thought, *there was absolutely no way.*

He didn’t dare speak or even move. He felt like he was entirely at Tom’s mercy; was held completely under his gaze and any slight motion would end it all forever.

‘Don’t move, alright, Harry?’

Tom said it so *mildly.* As though Harry’s brain had not frozen on the spot. As though his heart wasn’t thundering in his chest, roaring in his ears, and his cock wasn’t twitching so painfully he wanted to whine.

Tom absently wet his lips. His breath was fanning right over Harry’s cock. Half a centimetre and it would brush his mouth. A fraction.

Harry clamped down on his bottom lip. His hips gave a desperate twitch as Tom ran a hand along his length.

‘Tom,’ he began, voice so ragged that it was barely more than a whisper.

Tom — who seemed to find pleasure in wasting as much time as possible — finally took the head of Harry’s cock into his mouth, who shuddered violently.

It was already too much. Tom’s eyes were boring into his: dark, all-intense, and holding complete control. How *easily* Tom could change his mind. *Stop.* Any moment.

‘Oh, fuck,’ Harry breathed, fingers gripping the sheets. He didn’t dare touch Tom, who would have no such qualms if their situation were reversed. If he did, Tom would stop. Tom would stop and Harry would be completely, utterly *dead.*

‘Tom,’ he said again, biting back a moan.

Tom looked at him through his half-lidded eyes — looked at Harry, who must appear wrecked, *ruined* — and hollowed out his cheeks.

Thoughts blurred away. Everything went fuzzy around the edges, dulling in contrast to the sensation. Harry couldn't look away from Tom even if he wanted to.

The wet heat of Tom's mouth. Swallowing around him, tight and overwhelming. Harry was dizzy. His head spun. The sight alone was almost too much. His hips jerked and Tom shoved them downwards, pinning him in place with his hands.

Harry couldn't swallow the next moan when Tom mouthed sloppily around the head of his cock. He was babbling something at Tom, fighting with the urge to touch his hair, do something with his hands. To jerk forward into the wet heat of his mouth.

'Tom — god — *Tom* — '

Harry gripped the sheet tighter, his head falling back. His legs were trembling. He wondered would he pass out or come, and didn't care at this point. Blood was fuzzy in his ears, pleasure building in steady waves. And it was so good, so *perfect* —

Tom pulled off his cock with a slick pop and Harry gasped.

'Tom,' he said again, his voice rough.

Tom's mouth was red and swollen and wet with spit. His eyes were brightly curious and locked on Harry's face. 'Can I still fuck you?'

Harry had almost forgotten that, with what happened next. He stared at him for a moment and choked out a laugh.

'Yeah. Okay. I mean . . . '

Harry bit back the rest of the sentence and swallowed thickly. Letting go of the bedsheets, he reached out to touch Tom's face as a sort of assurance. The dazed sensation was starting to die away but he was still painfully on edge. Everything foggier, the line between fear and arousal blurred.

Tom's fingers traced lightly over Harry's hip bones and then wandered somewhere along his inner thigh.

Harry sucked in a low breath.

'Pass me my wand,' Tom said.

'*What*?'

‘My wand.’ His lips quirked. ‘You know, those things we cast spells with.’

Harry gave him a dirty look and snatched it off the bedside table. He paused for a second, giving Tom a doubtful look. ‘What for?’

‘To shove up your arse. Honestly, Harry...’

Harry blinked at him for a second, witheringly, and Tom laughed.

‘God, you’re such a dick,’ Harry said, some of the tension easing from his body. He tossed Tom the wand, who cast a spell silently.

Lube, Harry thought, and then *oh thank god.*

Nevertheless, his body tensed completely when Tom pressed a slick finger against his entrance. Harry forced the reaction not to show. Tom’s cock must be *aching,* he thought. And —*good god, they were really going to do this.*

He winced when Tom’s finger pressed inside. It felt *odd.* Slightly painful, but in a bearable way. Nothing on what he had experienced before. Another finger and Harry shuddered.

All at once, the reality of the situation struck him. He was having sex with Tom. Real sex. It was so absurd — so sickeningly depraved and wrong — that he laughed. What was one more step? They had already crossed an invisible line. Things could never go back to the way they were before and he would be a fool to think differently. There was only here and now, and it didn’t matter how it had started, how it would end ...

Harry’s laughter cut off abruptly when Tom’s fingers *curled.*

‘ Oh,’ Harry said, his voice weak and surprised.

‘Are you okay?’

Tom *knew* he was okay; his triumphant face shone with it.

‘I was better when you were sucking my dick,’ Harry snapped, and then clamped down on his lip when Tom pushed another finger inside him.

It seemed impossibly tight. The stretch burned and Harry’s head was reeling. Somewhere, distantly, was the slow build of pleasure. A certain *spike* when Tom’s fingers twisted and pressed inwards.

Gripping Tom's shoulder, a little harsher than necessary, Harry tried to gain back his slipping control.

Tom leaned upwards and kissed him languidly. 'Harry,' he said, breathing warm air against his mouth.

Harry felt a flare of pleasure so strong it made his head spin. His cock was leaking against his stomach. His head was light with desire and his hips were jerking of their own accord, right into Tom's hand. 'You can do it now,' Harry said. 'Just — do it.'

Tom took no further prompting. He withdrew his fingers and grasped Harry's hips. Harry sucked in a breath as the head of his cock pressed inside him.

It felt nothing like Tom's delicate, slim fingers and the rush of realisation made him dizzy. He barely had a moment to think before Tom was pressing forward. '*Harry,'* Tom said, the name drawn out like a moan.

'Don't move a second,' Harry said, inhaling sharply.

'Are you okay?' Tom's voice was strained, as though he was putting all his effort into keeping it together.

'Yeah. I mean, *fuck*, Tom. What the fuck?' Harry laughed, a nervous, disbelieving thing, and Tom hissed.

'Don't *clench* like that.'

'What, are you going to come already? That's hilarious.'

'No. You're such a *child*, Harry.'

Harry laughed again and Tom thrust forward, as if to prove he wasn't going to come. 'You're so fucking *tight,'* Tom said, breathing raggedly. 'God.'

The sensation of being full was as odd as before. Looking at Tom's flushed, pained face, Harry gritted out, 'you can move.'

It hurt terribly. Tom pulled backwards and then slowly thrust forward. Harry grit his teeth at the sensation, willing himself not to make a noise. He wouldn't — *couldn't* — in front of Tom. It was better to get lost in it, wait for the pain to ebb and reality to slide and flicker and blur.

‘Harry, are you —’Tom began, composure slipping. He was gripping Harry’s hips painfully, as though that was the only way to restrain himself. ‘Can I — ‘

‘Yes,’ Harry said, and because his cheeks were flaring with embarrassment and shame, added defensively, ‘stop thrusting like a bitch.’

Tom slammed forward at that and Harry made a desperate, pained noise. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek and dug his fingers into Tom’s shoulders. It was so obscene. So wrong. So shameful. Their skin slapping together, the mattress starting a faint, steady squeak, Tom’s hitched breathing, hot and damp and near.

Tom thrust forward again, slower this time, and the burn started to fade. Gripping Harry’s hips, Tom tilted them upwards, adjusting the angle. The next thrust hit something and Harry made a surprised noise.

Tom, ever observant, noticed immediately. He pulled out and back in — *and there, there, there* — making them both moan in surprise.

All at once, Harry became aware of Tom’s face. Hair hanging into his eyes. Sweat gleaming on his eyebrows, eyes heated and undone. He didn’t want to see Tom then. It brought a certain feeling of intimacy —a horrible, awkward vulnerability — that made him wish this were any other position, anything but one where they were looking directly into each other's faces.

Harry grimaced and closed his eyes. Digging his fingers into Tom’s shoulder, he pulled him forward to kiss. Pressed against his own, Tom’s body was impossibly heavy, and every jerk of their hips brought a spasm of pleasure.

Tom moaned into Harry’s mouth, completely unabashed, and fisted at his hair. It was so *loud.* Every slap of skin. Every indecent noise. And Tom was murmuring something, slamming forward so hard that Harry gasped.

Pleasure was building slowly in Harry’s gut. He met Tom’s movements, reaching down to touch his cock, unable to help the noises that came from his mouth now.

Tom yanked Harry’s hair hard, his rhythm faltering. ‘Harry,’ he said again. ‘God, Harry. I can’t believe you let me —you’re so — ‘His cock pulsed and he was burying himself inside Harry with a drawn-out

moan.

The sound was enough to make Harry shudder. It already felt like too much. Tom moaning near his ear and reaching down to wrap a hand tightly around him. Tom gasping into his neck, still inside him, clumsily jerking him off as he came down from his own orgasm. The depravity of it all. The steadily building pleasure and it was too much, too much —

Half a dozen more rough strokes and Harry was coming, muscles tensing, so hard it hurt, so hard everything else fell away. Tom released his dick and collapsed on top of his chest, burying his head in Harry's neck. After a moment, he pulled away, slipped out of him and collapsed on the mattress.

Harry stared at the ceiling, his head spinning. There was barely an inch of space between them. He could feel the slick, sweaty press of Tom's skin against his own. *Cum,* on his stomach. Inside him. He winced.

'Well,' Harry said, after a moment of silence. 'That happened.'

Tom made a noise, something between a laugh and an agreement, and they fell back into silence. Harry's breathing began to even out. The sheets were bunched around their feet and the green torchlight flickered against the sheen of sweat on Tom's chest. Harry wanted to reach out. To pull away.

'No-one is ever hearing about this,' Harry said. '*Ever.'*

'Really?' Tom rolled over to look at him. 'I was going to boast about it at the next Death Eater meeting but if you insist...'

'Oh, shut up.'

Tom smiled. He looked insufferably smug — he practically radiated it — but Harry couldn't find the urge to become annoyed.

'I can't believe that actually happened,' he said flatly.

Tom hummed and reached out to touch Harry's arm, fingers ghosting over the bruise that resided there. 'Same,' he said, and grinned at him, in an utterly pleased, stupid way.

Harry rolled his eyes, huffing out a laugh. Pressed against him, Tom was so *warm.* Usually, it was too much. Now he wanted to bury into

the heat, close his eyes, forget. It didn’t matter that it was sticky or disgusting, or they were both flush with sweat.

Tom leaned forward and kissed him lazily. Once on his mouth, then lightly on his jaw. His eyes were clear. Content. *Pleased.* Harry reached out to stroke Tom's hair, allowing the tangle of emotions to disappear. It would fade, he knew, and reality would creep back in. But just then it was alright.

Beginnings

December brought perpetual rainfall. It rolled over the mountains in fuzzy sheets, falling for what seemed like weeks on end. The castle's grounds were gloomier, with their barren trees, sodden grass, and overcast skies, thick with fog. Among the students was an increase in winter cloaks: hundreds of owls swooped into the Hall each morning, straining with parcels, wings beating weakly. Between the Slytherins, heating charms had spiked in popularity: they were cast at night for temporary relief and often wore off long before first light, resulting in a string of complaints targeted at Professor Slughorn.

After much protest, half a dozen Slug Club meetings and several animated discussions with Headmaster Dippet, two new fireplaces sprung up in the Slytherin Common Room and new quilts — heavy, emerald and woollen — appeared in the dorms.

Something had relaxed between Harry and Tom, quiet and unspoken. Perhaps it was the knowledge resting there, inexplicably known; a silent acknowledgement of things laid to rest — at least for now.

Harry was content in a way that was entirely foreign. They did rounds together, wandering through the darkened castle, talking of nothing and everything. Chatted easily in the Common Room and classes, lounged out while doing homework. It no longer mattered that it was temporary — Harry felt *light,* good, everything easy and natural. And wasn't it alright to finally have one good thing in his life? One thing that let him feel normal?

While his relationship improved with Tom, things with Ron and Hermione were as tense as ever. After his argument with Ron, Harry had tried to give them space; space, he reasoned, for all of them to look at the situation objectively. For his friends to make up their minds — make their final decisions — and see what came next.

The wait was more agonising than anything else. The *wait,* when he met Hermione's cool brown eyes across the classroom and wanted to crawl inside his skin; saw Ron gazing at him darkly, bewildered and tense, jaw set.

It became unbearable after a while. The tension, the expectancy, the half-looks and downcast eyes. Feeling rather like he was about to get punched in the stomach, Harry steeled himself and sat beside Ron in Defence.

It was two weeks since their most recent argument. The thought went through Harry's head as he shrugged off his bag and pulled out his textbook. *Two weeks.* Ron stiffened in surprise, eyes staring rigidly ahead. On his right, Hermione glanced over, giving Harry a worried look.

'We need to talk,' Harry said quietly.

Class hadn't started yet and the room was abuzz with noise. Two Gryffindor boys were throwing scrunched up balls of parchment into the rubbish bin, loudly exclaiming when one of them was successful. Students were still milling around, taking out their supplies, chatting brightly, and for half a moment Harry thought Ron would get up and move seats.

'Now?' Ron said, his voice strained. 'You've picked a nice time, haven't you? What, is this the only time your boyfriend lets you away?'

Harry bit back the instinctive: *he's not my boyfriend.*

*'*Come to think of it,' Ron continued, 'Riddle's looking a bit pissed. Shouldn't you be sitting over there with him?'

That wasn't entirely fair. After the fight with Ron and Hermione, Harry sat with Abraxas in Defence, a fact Ron had chosen to ignore. Eyes steadily locked on Tom, who *was* glancing at them coolly, Ron continued to speak. 'What do you want anyway? Before Merrythought comes in.'

'We need to talk,' Harry said, his voice equally low. 'I know we've been avoiding each other and I'm a dick, I know that and … will you hear me out? *Please?* And if you still hate me, I get it. I just need to know, Ron.' He waved a hand. 'We need to sort it out.'

'Alright,' Ron said, after a moment of staring ahead. 'I don't know what you're expecting though.'

Harry smiled gratefully. 'I'm not expecting anything. I'm just tired of the uncertainty. I can't *not know* anymore.' He was stroking the feathered end of his quill in a soothing, subconscious manner when Ron turned around to look at him.

'Alright, mate,' Ron said, flat and resolved. 'But I still think you're a fucking wanker.'

Harry didn't flinch at the bluntness but blew out a long, steady breath

and said, ‘I know. Anyway, that’s all I wanted to say. I’ll move now if you want … we can talk later.’

Ron hesitated for a split-second and the doors of the classroom burst open. Professor Merrythought stalked through, a cup of peppermint tea levitating beside her. Her white hair was swept into a bun, and her sharp face glanced between all of them, lingering on Harry and Ron, who had frozen in place.

‘OWL revision,’ she began, abruptly turning away. ‘Unpleasant, I know — especially in regards to the practical elements of the course — but very necessary.’

There was the faint scent of musky perfume drifting towards them. Harry looked at Ron from the corner of his eye, uneasily, and then at Hermione, who was wide-eyed.

‘For the practical element of your NEWT, the examiners will expect you to have a perfect grasp on everything we studied in the past. That includes dispelling Boggarts, shields, managing class XXX magical creatures, and a fast, instinctive array of curses and charms.’ She tapped her wand against the blackboard and a piece of chalk flung into the air, writing out the words.

‘An ability to heal minor injuries neatly and effectively, with minimal to no scarring. A good intuition. An element of uniqueness — a Patronus, an exemplary spell, something to show off with.’

She rounded on them, her eyebrows raised. ‘Well? Think you can manage that, Edwin?’

Rosier muttered something under his breath, causing Professor Merrythought to hum doubtfully. Harry hid a smile.

‘Anyway, today we’re going over defensive and offensive spells. *Nonverbally.* Why I still have to say this I do not know …’

Hermione’s hand jumped into the air.

‘Yes, Miss Granger?’

‘May I have a copy of the OWL curriculum, professor? As you know, I was home-schooled and we did things a bit differently … I want to make sure I’m up to scratch, you see.’

Professor Merrythought nodded vigorously. ‘Of course, of course. You

can share it with Weasley and Potter if you wish. However, I'm sure you're not behind at all, Miss Granger, you perform exceptionally well in this subject.'

The two of them shared a glowing look — Hermione pink-cheeked from the praise; Professor Merrythought's eyes crinkled up, her mouth soft and fond.

'Bet Hermione never looks at you like that,' Harry said quietly.

Ron laughed — a small, surprised noise — and then froze. Harry's insides seemed to freeze too, so painfully that he was unable to speak for a second.

'No,' Ron said then, thickly, 'you can practically hear the wedding bells between those two.'

'Yeah,' Harry agreed. 'You know Hermione and professors. No-one can compare, really.'

They were silent for a second — Harry not daring to shatter it this time, knowing it was for Ron to do; Ron, if he so much as chose.

'Why didn't you tell me you were gay?'

This was said low, each word stiff, and yet Harry's stomach swooped.

'I don't think — 'he began, and chewed at his bottom lip in thought. 'I still like girls.'

'Really?'

'Yes. I just … like him as well.'

Both of their eyes snapped to Tom. Ron's were scrutinising and doubtful, locked on the back of Tom's dark head and the hint of side-profile that was visible. Harry felt his cheeks heat defensively.

'Are you sure you haven't been slipped a love potion?' Ron said doubtfully.

'I don't *love* him,' Harry said, throat tightening at the thought. 'And honestly, I wish I had been. But Tom's still an enormous dick a lot of the time, so there's that …'

Ron's jaw tightened. He looked like he was getting ready to ask another question —Harry prayed it wasn't anything sex-related—

before Professor Merrythought ordered them to their feet to practice duelling. There was a screech of chairs and a burst of nervous chatter.

Grimacing, Harry turned to Ron. 'I'll partner with Abraxas,' he said, 'it's alright.'

Ron looked uncertain and Hermione — watching—immediately offered to duel either one of them.

'No,' Ron said, shaking his head. 'It's just class, right? It's not a big deal.'

'Yeah,' Harry said, rather uneasily. They stood across from each other. Professor Merrythought's voice floated through the air, saying things such as "*if I hear one syllable of magic spoken aloud, I'm immediately pairing you with someone else"* and "*I don't want to see any Dark Magic or you'll get detention until Christmas."*

Harry and Ron glanced at each other. Hermione had paired with another Gryffindor: Nia Shafiq, the Head Girl. Harry, who knew from Tom that Shafiq preferred theory-based magic, wasn't too worried about Hermione's prospects.

He and Ron on the other hand …

They bowed to each other stiffly and the duel began. Streams of light fizzled through the air, along with shrieks of laughter and surprise as students weaved and darted out of the way. Ron cast at once—expelliarmus—that Harry batted aside. Again, and again as Harry weaved and dodged and conjured shields.

'At least cast back!' Ron shouted. 'Come on. *Christ*, mate.'

Harry hesitated. Professor Merrythought would be over soon, wondering why he wasn't obeying her instructions. Waving his wand quickly, he sent forth a weak jet of pink light.

'A tickling hex? Harry, are you bloody serious?'

'I don't want —'he began, diving away from Ron's latest curse. 'You can curse me if you want. I deserve it.'

'You deserve it,' Ron repeated flatly. 'Bloody right you do.'

'Exactly,' Harry said, watching Ron's face tighten in frustration. Ron had been bottling it up but now the feelings were trickling out,

regardless; a cocktail of disgust and anger, steadily building as his resolve cracked.

The air between them thickened. It would never clear, not any other way. Instead it would build –resentment, growing like something insidious, aided by the distance, the lack of contact, more and more …

'Don't just stand there and let me hex you,' Ron said. 'Fight back. *You* caused this, you dickhead! You've brought all this on yourself.'

'Yeah,' Harry agreed, knowing they were one sentence away from the pretence crumbling, everything spilling forward in a hot blaze of anger.

Ron's fingers were white around his wand, his stance stiff and defensive. Harry stared at them for a second and braced himself.

One sentence.

'What would you say makes you angrier: me fucking Riddle or telling you about it?'

A jet of blue light hit him square in the face.

'Harry! Fucking hell! Do you have a death wish or something?'

As blood streamed steadily from his nose —at least Harry *thought* it was his nose, it seemed to come from that general, throbbing location —Hermione dropped her wand and ran forward.

'Fuck, mate,' Ron breathed, wand falling. 'You were meant to cast back, you bastard.'

Harry raised his wand to his face and siphoned away the blood. Immediately, someone hissed.

'Here, let me,' Hermione said, raising her wand to Harry's nose, which was gushing a new, steady stream of warm blood. 'Ron, what *was* that?'

Professor Merrythought was marching forward, parting the little

crowd that had gathered around them.

‘Step away, Miss Granger,’ she said, giving Harry a once over and wincing. ‘Broken nose and jaw, if I’m not mistaken. It’s best to let the Hospital Wing handle it if you want to keep that pretty face intact, Mr Potter. I don’t fancy messing around with bones today.’

She barked at the rest of the class to keep practising, who shuffled guiltily away. Harry pinched the bridge of his nose to stop the bleeding. The floor already looked like a crime scene.

‘Weasley! Granger! Assist him, please.’

A great deal of swearing ensued. Hermione was vibrating with anger, though at Harry or Ron neither could tell. They stiffly made their way to the Hospital Wing, Harry mopping his face with a tissue, the white-hot pain dulling everything else. The matron immediately began to tut *—Defence. Heaven knows why they allow that barbaric subject to run. Teaching children how to cut each other open, I’ll never understand …*

She fixed his nose immediately but the jaw required more work. Several numbing charms, a potion that tasted like something from Nearly Headless Nick’s Deathday Party (a mixture of rotten fish and putrid eggs that Harry downed while holding his nose), and they were being ushered into the brightly lit hall and told to skip the rest of Defence.

Out in the corridor, Hermione rounded on Harry at once. ‘Why did you let him do that?’ she snapped. ‘I saw you lower your wand.’

Harry couldn’t explain how they needed to get that out between them and thaw a bit of the tension. He shrugged. ‘At least now we’re out of class?’

He shared a quick look with Ron; a look Hermione would never understand. Ron nodded his head stiffly, once in acknowledgement.

‘Honestly, you two. Do you *like* physical confrontation? Is that how you express your feelings? Punching and shoving and bone-breaking curses — ‘

‘I didn’t know he was going to let it hit him!’

‘Yes, anyway,’ Harry cleared his throat. ‘Now all that’s out of the way, can we talk? Or do you want to hex me again?’

‘I don’t want to hex you,’ Ron said and paused. *‘Again.*’ He folded his arms, looking at him expectantly.

Harry chewed his lip in thought. ‘Things aren’t as bad as you think in Slytherin,’ he began. ‘There are wankers, sure, who want nothing better than to become the Death Eaters we knew. But mostly, they’re just kids. Lonely, or naive, or wanting to be a part of something. Tom basically rules the house, sure, but that’s more for show.’

His skin felt itchy but Harry resisted the urge to touch it. Ron and Hermione were looking at him expressionlessly.

‘So, you’re saying the cult isn’t as bad as we think. Hell, it’s even a bit of *fun.* Why don’t we all join those scumbags while we’re at it?’ Ron scoffed bitterly.

‘I didn’t say that, and I’m not on their side. I never will be. I still oppose it. We argue about it *all the time — ‘*

*‘*You and Riddle?’ Hermione said, frowning.

‘Yes. It’s not this one-sided thing you both seem to believe it is. I don’t agree with him or appease him *at all.’*

‘And he hasn’t murdered you on the spot?’ Ron said.

‘No. Honestly, he probably *likes* having someone to argue with. Tom’s weird like that.’

‘Okay,’ Hermione said slowly. ‘So you argue with Riddle about … basically his entire life plan. His Death Eaters, his ideas for after school, presumably, and you’re still …’

‘Fucking?’ Ron supplied.

Harry ignored him. ‘I know it’s weird,’ he said. ‘But at least this way, I know what he’s up to. *And* I have first-hand experience with the Death Eaters—’

‘Not the only thing you have first-hand experience with,’ Ron muttered.

‘—Before any of it starts again. The war, the horcruxes. If Tom tries to go down the Voldemort route again, I’ll *know*. So while it’s twisted and messed up… ’he blew out a breath. ‘You can’t say being close to him doesn't have advantages.’

‘It’s dangerous though,’ Hermione said. ‘You could get blindsided.’

‘Into what? Taking over the Wizarding World? Murdering people?’ Harry couldn’t tamp down the frustration that rose in his throat; the hurt that she would even question it after everything they had been through.

Hermione looked slightly guilty. ‘I didn’t mean—’

‘Well, I *did,’* Ron interjected. ‘And let’s not forget that Riddle knows everything about our time. He probably knows you’re the one who's meant to defeat him and is ensuring that will never happen.’

‘If that was the case, wouldn't he have murdered me by now?’ Harry ran a hand through his hair and sat down on the bench carved into the wall. Ron had begun pacing up and down the corridor, and Hermione stood with her arms crossed.

‘So, you’re dating Tom Riddle,’ Hermione said bluntly. She held up a hand when Harry opened his mouth. ‘Or *whatever.* And you don’t intend to agree with him, or change your views, but rather to break off the relationship — ‘

‘Relationships don’t last forever,’ Harry said. ‘If you insist on calling it that. It took Voldemort fifty years to take over the Wizarding World. I think by then, Tom won’t be much of a threat anymore.’

They were silent for a moment. Ron had stopped pacing, but his hands were in fists by his sides. Hermione sat on the bench beside Harry, chewing her bottom lip between her teeth.

‘Okay, I have a weird question,’ Ron said. ‘How did this whole sex thing start? What possessed you to decide *shagging Riddle* was a great idea? Riddle who is a bloke, and nuts, and creepily obsessed with you.’

Harry opened his mouth but nothing wanted to come out. ‘He’s pretty attractive,’ was what he finally settled on, with forced nonchalance. ‘And I like him.’

I like him. I like him. I like him.

The admittance felt stronger than it really was; felt like unpeeling a layer of his very soul and leaving it there for Ron and Hermione to dissect.

'You have to trust me when I say I know what he's like. But he's not — all bad. Maybe, ninety-percent …'

They didn't appreciate the joke.

'I still hate him,' Ron said. *'So much*. Even more so now, considering the fact you're bloody going around wanking him off and — '

'Ron!' Hermione said.

Harry raised his eyebrows. 'You're really fixated on the sex, aren't you?'

'Well, obviously. It's a bit degrading, isn't it?'

'It is?'

'It's, you know … 'Ron waved a hand awkwardly, not willing to say the words outright. 'I hardly expect *he's* the one who …'

'Let's not go there, mate,' Harry said, hoping his face wasn't as blisteringly red as it felt.

The three of them looked at each other awkwardly for a second, and Harry felt a laugh rise in his throat, all shame and embarrassment and relief spilling forward.

'I know I can't fix it,' he said, 'or change the things he's done in the past, but I just want you to know that I'm still on your side and that isn't going to change. And I'm sorry for everything. You see him as Voldemort, and I don't, and while you don't have to interact with Tom ever — in fact, you really *shouldn't* — I get that you're not comfortable with me anymore either.'

'It's not that, Harry!' Hermione turned around to look at him earnestly. 'It's weird, yes, but maybe you do know him better than we do. I want to trust you because you can make your own choices. I know how much you hated him at the start of the year. Not differentiating Riddle and Voldemort is our problem, not yours. *But* — 'she held up her hands—'I'm worried about you.'

'Why? And don't say something sappy, please.'

‘Well, what if he breaks your heart? What if he’s *using* you? It’s going to tear you apart, and Riddle won’t even care because he’s a dick — ‘

‘He’s such a fucking dick,’ Ron agreed.

Harry didn’t know what to say to that. His collar was tight and their eyes were far too intrusive. Didn’t they realise these were thoughts he had already experienced? From the windows, afternoon light was streaming in, and Harry focused on how it danced across Hermione’s mane of hair.

‘We’re probably both using each other a bit,’ he said, ‘what with how it’s going to end and all. But there’s no more lying or hiding it. And anyway, maybe I’ll affect him more, ever think of that? Tom probably thinks he can have everything he wants in life, consequences be damned.’

Harry’s lips twisted bitterly but the words were light. The acknowledgement was coursing through his body and it felt good to get it out in the open. He had spent a lot of time thinking about Tom; a lot of time agonising through all the possibilities when his resolve cracked and uncertainty oozed forward.

‘I’m sure Riddle isn’t going to get heartbroken,’ Ron said. ‘No offence, mate.’

‘Well, neither am I,’ Harry said. ‘Honestly, I know it’s fucked up and weird, but I’m prepared to end it whenever he starts going down the path of Voldemort. No matter what it takes.’

Ron licked his lips. Hermione was raking her hands through her hair, thoughts blatant—*Fool, you fool, Harry. Is temporary happiness really worth the future agony?*

They didn’t understand that he had to try. How not knowing was worse; how if he was a fool, he was a willing one. At least he’d know and wouldn’t have the connection hovering there, like an invisible tie; wouldn’t have the *what-if* and the tiny possibility that things could have gone differently. The bond he couldn’t ignore …

‘Lunch is starting,’ Ron said abruptly. ‘We should get to the Hall.’

‘What exactly was the meaning of that masochistic spectacle earlier?’

Tom’s voice was light but Harry wasn’t fooled. He saw the way Tom’s eyes had hovered on him, as if checking everything was properly in place, before sitting down across from him on the bench. The tension lingered in Tom’s expression, disapproval evident in the slight creases around his eyebrows.

Harry appreciated the subtlety of it, nevertheless. He had dealt with enough confrontation earlier. Tom, while making his dislike of all things Gryffindor clear, wasn’t going to press further than a dirty look and for that Harry was grateful.

He had been bombarded with questions ever since entering the Hall.

‘Weren’t you and Weasley *friends?’*

‘Merrythought didn’t give him detention or nothing. I knew she favoured Gryffindors.’

‘How come you didn’t curse him back?’

Harry ignored most of the questions, shrugging or answering in a vague way. Now, turning to Tom, the truth hovered on his lips.

‘They’re Gryffindors,’ Harry said finally. ‘The direct approach always works best.’

‘What, being cursed in the face?’

‘Confrontation,’ Harry agreed. ‘And I deserved it.’

Tom made a doubtful noise, casting a dark look towards the Gryffindor Table. Ignoring this, Harry leaned backwards on the bench. He didn’t need to turn around to feel Ron and Hermione’s eyes: they were practically reflected in Tom’s, whose lips were starting to curl upwards in amusement.

‘Stop taunting them,’ Harry said.

‘They’re *glaring* at me. What possibly could you have told them to warrant that result?’ His lips twitched into a small, suggestive smirk, making Harry roll his eyes.

‘Your personality’s enough to warrant an Azkaban sentence, let’s not pretend differently.’

‘It clearly doesn’t bother you though.’ Tom paused, something shifting in his eyes. Harry thought of how he had left the classroom with Ron and Hermione; how Tom’s pause was just long enough to betray a sliver of uncertainty.

‘You tell yourself that,’ Harry said, and Tom’s expression smoothed back to assurance. Though the rest of the meal passed casually, Harry felt the burn of Ron and Hermione’s eyes on his back, scrutinising and sharp, as they assessed his interaction with Tom. Posture stiff, unable to help himself, Harry turned away and busied himself in conversation with Lucretia instead.

Ever since they started having sex, hiding the relationship became more difficult. Though never explicitly stated, Harry was pretty sure all the seventh-year boys knew. If it wasn’t the stabbing looks from Rosier, it was Avery’s new attempts at being nice to him — attempts Harry disliked immensely, with their false sincerity and poorly veiled contempt.

It was mostly Tom’s fault, Harry reckoned. Tom didn’t have the bone-deep instinct to hide things the way Harry did. He was shameless, unbothered and as blatantly assured with this as he was with every other aspect of his life. Tom could do what he wanted in Slytherin, and no-one would dare challenge him. He liked the power he held, the hush that would fall when he entered rooms, the lowered gazes at the floor.

Or did he even notice the casual affection? A hand absently touching Harry’s shoulder as he passed; a leg pressed against his in class; fingers brushing as he reached for a quill or ingredient, all the while barely looking up. *Possessive* was a more suitable adjective, but apart from the initial surprise, Harry had become used to it. Tom was darkly possessive with every other thing in his life —really, Harry had signed up for this.

Now, exiting the Hall in brisk strides, Harry tried to ignore the racing images that flashed through his mind. How obvious it must look to someone who knew. Every touch, every conversation, every hint and thrill of contact, however small. His skin crawled with the realisation as though a cold sweat had appeared under his collar.

The sea of students in front of Harry parted to reveal a flash of red hair. Hermione's bobbing brown head. Robes flapping. Fingers interlaced, two figures leaning towards each other to talk.

For a second, Harry almost called out. The sound lodged in his throat, small and choked, and they disappeared up the stairs, swallowed by the crowd.

Hermione had changed out of her school robes and her hair was wet and braided. In the dim light of the library it gleamed black. She ran her hand along it, twisting the end of the braid around her fingers absently. Ron's shoulder was touching hers, his freckled hand splayed on the table. Seated across from them, Harry felt like he was preparing for interrogation.

'I don't want to abandon you, Harry,' Hermione said. She looked up, solemn, flipping her hair over her shoulder. 'You're my best friend, and I love you, but you're so deep in Slytherin now, so close to *him,* that I'm worried.'

There were no textbooks on the table in front of them. It was a meeting, nothing more.

Harry traced a groove in the wood with his finger and looked up. 'I don't *want* it to be just them, you know. I miss you and Ron. I know, I don't deserve your friendship or anything but —'

'Don't say that, Harry. If anything, you're hurting yourself, not us. And in a twisted way, I suppose I can understand it.'

Beside her, Ron's face was resigned. He rubbed a hand across it and sighed. 'You're a right twat, Harry. And I know you don't want to involve us, or hurt us, even indirectly — I know that, because you're a git like that, all sacrificial and crap …'

Ron stopped, unwilling to go on. In the half-empty library — the sky navy through the long windows and the only light from flickering torches — the silence lingered.

'I have something for you,' Harry said suddenly. He feigned rummaging in his bag for a moment to avoid looking at Ron's startled

face. The gloves were sitting at the top, as they had been since Harry had gotten them. *Waiting,* for the right moment, though it would never come, not anymore.

'Slughorn gave them to me,' Harry said, passing the gloves across the table. 'Though the Chudley Cannons is more your team than mine.'

'What — '

'It's not *charity* or anything. And I don't expect you to forgive me, it's not about that. I just thought you'd want them, to be honest. They're pretty neat.'

Ron blinked, taking the orange gloves carefully in his hands. His eyes widened when he saw the signature splayed across the front. 'Holy shit,' he breathed. 'These would have been worth a fortune in our day.'

'Right?' Harry said. 'Didn't you have a poster of him in your bedroom?'

'Yeah,' Ron said, looking rather dazed. It made Harry's heart clench. He had envisioned giving Ron the gloves — envisioned it happening after they made up, whenever that would be. But the possibility of reunion was slipping now, the day becoming more and more unlikely.

'Slughorn gave you these?' Ron repeated.

'Yeah. Surprisingly kind of him, though that might have been different if he knew their worth.'

'You sure you don't want to keep them?'

'No, they're yours now.' Harry shrugged lightly. 'They were lying in my trunk anyway and … 'his throat was tight. Hands clammy. 'It's not a big deal.'

Harry took a steadying breath and pushed onwards. 'Anyway, I know things have been bad between us recently. And the whole thing with Tom is messed up —I know it's messed up.'

'So you're prepared for the absolute balls up that will follow?' Ron said.

'Yeah.' Harry grimaced. 'But right now, I'm the only thing stopping him from becoming Voldemort.'

Ron stared at the Quidditch gloves for a moment and then stuffed them in his bag. Leaning towards Harry, her expression firm, Hermione began.

'Okay,' she said. 'Your relationship is weird and unhealthy and most likely going to end in disaster.'

'Your boyfriend is sociopathic, remorseless and set on taking over the world,' Ron said.

'I worry about you becoming too attached.'

'I worry about him *murdering you.'*

'I can't even call you an idiot because you seem perfectly aware of how ridiculous it all is.'

'You're a complete dick, to be honest.'

'*Ron.'*

'Fine, a wanker. Better?'

Harry hid a smile at their antics. 'Finished now?' he said, trying to keep the uncertainty from his tone.

'I dunno, I could do this all day.' Ron leaned back in his chair. 'There's at least a week's worth of insults built up in my head.'

'Go for it,' Harry said, but Ron only frowned.

'Naw, you get the idea. Hermione would chew my ear off anyway.'

Hermione shot him a disapproving look and cleared her throat. 'I'm not abandoning you, Harry, disagreement or not.'

'You're not? *Why?'*

'You clearly need us,' she said simply. 'And we need you.'

Harry didn't trust his voice after that sentiment. His heart was thumping loudly, painfully, and he tried to convey his thoughts with his eyes; tried to show just a sliver of the gratitude he felt.

'Need us is an understatement,' Ron said. 'What with your Death Eater house, and the whole Riddle fiasco. Hermione's right.'

They looked at each other for a long moment. Ron's face was still tight but Harry would take what he could get. 'Alright,' he said, clearing his throat. 'I'm really sorry.'

He didn't deserve them. He never had. All his thoughts came in a rush —it was as though a dam had opened, bursting forward —and relief was so overwhelming that a lump rose in Harry's throat.

'If he ever does anything to you, we're done,' Harry said, his voice thick with resolve. 'I promise.'

'We can hold our own against Riddle,' Hermione said indignantly.

'Yeah, I'd like to see him try,' Ron agreed.

Harry wouldn't. He shook his head wearily, fighting to keep back a smile. He felt like he had escaped something devastating —The Thing which he had been steeling himself for all day— and the relief was enough to make him dizzy.

It wasn't perfect. Tentative and careful and the air heavy with unspoken accusations. Harry knew it would never be the same again; that from the moment they had landed on the fringe of the Forbidden Forest it was irrevocably changed. But he still had them—somehow, incredulously—and that was better than anything.

Under Your Skin

The potions classroom was hazy with fumes. Tom absently stirred his cauldron, glancing at the clock: four minutes, seventeen seconds before he added the doxy wings. Seven counter-clockwise stirs, applied with light pressure.

Professor Slughorn was at his desk, marking essays. His feet were upon the table — boots polished, the leather nut-brown and gleaming — and he caught Tom's eye and beamed.

Tom smiled back at him, an instinct. He had been schooling his face into that expression for so long that it was ingrained into him. Beside Tom, Harry was cutting toadstools into long, precise strips, his eyes lowered. His hair was more rumpled than usual from the steam, and he was chewing his bottom lip between his teeth. Tom allowed himself to look for a moment, indulgently. Harry was endearing like that, tousled and concentrated, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. *Lovely.*

Tom smoothly tipped the doxy wings into his potion and brought his eyes back to the cauldron. They rarely talked while making potions, and only when between steps. At once, Harry had grasped Tom's annoyance at the distraction, intuitively knowing to leave him alone while he worked.

It was flattering, the way he could detect such subtleties, and unnerving in a way. Harry knew Tom intuitively, more than anyone ever had. While some had scratched the surface — a remarkable fate, in Tom's opinion — Harry had gotten *under* it, so deep he may as well have been reading Tom's mind. Perhaps it was the horcrux. The part of Harry that would always be a piece of Tom.

'You should be on step seven or eight by now. And stir *lightly* please, Mr Avery — look at how Mr Malfoy is doing it, none of that heavy arm action.'

Tom allowed his mind to wander. His potion was in its settled phase: fifteen minutes before he had to stir again. Fingers stretched out on the desk, Tom arranged his ingredients with a quick burst of wandless magic.

Harry glanced at him, shaking his head. 'Show-off,' he said, sounding fond.

Tom smirked. ‘You can’t say anything until you fix that potion, dear.’

Harry scowled, like he always did when Tom called him a pet name, therefore producing the desired effect.

‘There’s nothing wrong with it, *sweetheart.’*

Tom laughed; both of them did. ‘You tell yourself that. Isn’t it meant to be *golden?’*

It was a shade off and Harry gave him a withering look, causing Tom to smile. Professor Slughorn had left his desk and was making his way around the classroom, dispersing fumes with his wand, bellowing out instructions and chiming into conversations.

As Harry continued with his potion, pushing his dark hair from his eyes, Tom’s mind went back to a memorable half an hour they had spent in a broom-closet the other day. Harry had sucked him off, all messy and inexperienced and *wonderful*, his hands digging into Tom’s hip bones, whose back was against the hard door, fingers tangled in Harry’s hair.

After his reunion with Weasley and Granger, Harry was in an exceptionally good mood. Tension had fizzled from his body, leaving him assured and loose-limbed. *Tom’s,* in a way that was irrefutable.

Glancing at the desk, Tom moved his hand away from where it brushed Harry's. He felt a prickle of unease at the reminder of how things had advanced. His feelings had grown beyond the heady, dark thing of the past. They had settled, placated, so ordinary — so unlike *Tom* — that it left him itchy.

‘Weasley? A pinch more armadillo bile, perhaps?’

Harry looked around—of course he did—and Tom’s lips twitched into a smirk. Weasley. Granger. Oh, how they *loathed* him. The hateful looks across the classrooms, the low voices as they glanced between Tom and Harry, the unrestrained disapproval.

Tom looked around too, meeting Granger’s mistrustful eyes. His lips stretched upwards and her face tightened. He had what they wanted and how they *hated* him for it. Tom was delighted.

‘Oh, Miss Granger! This is looking marvellous! You’ll have to allow me to keep a bottle — put it on the shelf, you know, and show the sixth years what they’re aiming for.’

Tom scowled. Despite the fun aggravating them brought, Weasley and Granger ate up Harry's time, forcing him to *share*.

He glanced back at his potion. Worse than that, there wasn't anything he could do about it because Harry — lovely, brilliant Harry — would run straight back to them, tossing Tom from his life.

His cauldron was bubbling now. Four stirs, counter-clockwise then continuously for five minutes. Crimson, it should be. A shade off and it was spoiled.

Tom's insides *writhed*.

'Don't get any ideas about the cloak. Just because I'm letting you use it, doesn't mean you're allowed to again. It's only because …'

'—We're sneaking out to have sex and you don't want to run into your two Gryffindor friends.'

Harry nodded. '*Exactly.*'

They had reached the seventh floor, quiet apart from the chatter of portraits. Tom watched Harry, who had the invisibility cloak in his hands, silky and silver. Harry hesitated for a second before his face smoothed out.

'Right,' he said, and in one decisive movement, draped the cloak over them. The material was fluid — thin and cold to the touch, interwoven with magic. Tom touched it in fascination.

Not just an invisibility cloak, he thought, a *Deathly Hallow*.

He had rummaged through Harry's cloak when he found out about the time-travel, slipping the cloak over his head and examining the flawless display of magic. This, however, felt different. *Thrilling*.

'We'll need to disillusion our feet,' Harry said, quietly, 'or you could hunch down more.'

The cloak didn't fit two people and they were squashed very close. Tom did as Harry suggested until his feet disappeared. Something — not quite triumph, but similar, softer — filled him. It came down to

one stark difference: Harry had trusted him enough to show him the cloak. Trusted *Tom*, with his only prized possession from the past.

‘I take it your Gryffindor friends know about the Room of Requirement too,’ Tom said, as they walked onwards.

His stomach twisted at the reminder that he wasn’t the only person who knew of its existence. *That* realisation had come unpleasantly.

‘Do you reckon they use it for sex as well?’

‘I don’t want to think about Ron and Hermione having sex, thanks,’ Harry said. ‘But probably—god*,* Tom*.’*

Tom laughed. He could feel the tickle of Harry’s soft hair from where they leaned together. The faint scent of shampoo and skin. He wanted to bury his head in Harry’s neck and *inhale.*

They reached the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy slowly. Tom’s thoughts were gravitating around the revelation that Harry knew of the room — the room he had once hoped to hide a horcrux in, forever leaving a part of himself at Hogwarts. Now, however, as they rounded the final corner, his mind wandered to more pleasant thoughts.

‘What should I ask it for?’ Harry said, his voice right near Tom’s ear.

‘I don’t know, Harry, maybe a *bed.* I’ll do it*.’* Tom, no longer caring about Weasley and Granger, slipped the cloak from his head and paced back and forth before the wall. The door materialised before them, golden, just as Tom always remembered, and he strode through, knowing Harry would follow.

‘Oh, great, it’s not a torture chamber,’ Harry said, glancing around. ‘I’m impressed.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah, I mean, that bed could be a bit bigger but— ‘

All at once, the bed expanded and Harry smirked in triumph.

‘*I* did that,’ Tom felt the need to say.

‘Are you sure?’ He was loosening his tie, kicking off his shoes.

‘Yes,’ Tom said, though his conviction disappeared. He moved forward, overtaken by an uncontrollable impulse to touch.

Harry smiled, lips twitching at the corners. ‘Watch,’ he said, and the sheets turned red and gold.

Tom gave him a disgusted look and abruptly they were white again; Harry was leaning forward, breath very near, eyes fluttering closed. Tom reached out to touch his face, trace his jaw, run a finger over the swell of Harry’s bottom lip.

‘I bet Weasley and Granger fuck in Gryffindor sheets,’ Tom murmured. Harry leaned backwards, eyes flying open.

Tom laughed. He felt a rush of such fondness — possessive, and heady, and light, and *Harry* — that it caught him off-guard.

‘That’s too far,’ Harry said, shaking his head, ‘you’re disgusting.’

Tom yanked him forward, ignoring the momentary uncertainty. Why ruin something when it was already good? When it was *exactly* what he wanted?

‘You started it,’ Tom said, and tangled his fingers in Harry’s thick, dark hair. He kissed him to shut him up and Harry got his fingers in the collar of Tom’s robes, tugging him towards the bed.

They were stretched out on the cool sheets. Harry lay on his side with the duvet yanked halfway up his bare stomach, and Tom leaned towards him, fingers brushing over Harry’s rib-cage, drawn to the heat, the sensation of skin, the slow rise and fall of his chest.

The Room of Requirement didn’t elicit the desperation of the dorms or an empty broom closet. There was no prospect of interruption, hanging like a second-thought in every moment that drew out longer than necessary. Tom’s mind was a steady *hum*.

Harry seemed to sense it too. His eyes were half-lidded and he had a hand sprawled between them, occasionally brushing against Tom’s chest. There was a half-smile on his face, light and unconscious. An absent smile. *Private*.

Tom let his fingers touch that too.

‘Are you staying at the castle for Christmas?’ Tom said.

Harry let out a surprised huff of breath. ‘Where else would I go? Track down my great-grandparents?’ His eyes were clear, amused.

‘That would generate a lot of new questions,’ Tom said. He didn’t mention the offhand comment Abraxas had made about inviting Harry over for Christmas, nor acknowledge the hot feeling of hatred it stirred within him.

‘Yeah,’ Harry said, looking distracted. His eyes were on Tom’s throat. His lips. Then Harry leaned forward, until his mouth was barely a centimetre away, and reached forward to stroke Tom’s cheek.

Tom froze. No longer hazy with desire, the intimacy of the act was like a dousing of cold water. Harry kissed him so *sweetly,* barely a press of lips. The tenderness made Tom want to squirm. He was overcome with the need to put some distance between them, or deepen it, perhaps, until the incentive was mutual lust. Not … whatever this was.

Tom took a fistful of Harry’s hair, marvelling at the feel under his fingers. Harry’s mouth was hot, his eyes lidded, his fingers still stroking softly over Tom’s cheekbone. It was unbearable.

Tom pulled away, ever so slightly, and Harry made an annoyed noise in his throat. Pausing, Tom leaned back in, unable to part from him completely. And wasn’t that just *pathetic*?

All at once, he felt sick. Untangling his fingers from Harry’s hair, Tom sat up and inched away.

‘Want to go back to the Common Room?’ Harry said. His face was blank except for the tiniest furrow between his eyebrows.

‘Yeah,’ Tom said, snatching his robes up from where they were folded. Looking at Harry made his stomach swoop unpleasantly. His stupid, tousled head and those great, green eyes. The flush in his cheeks, delightfully radiant. Tom wanted to crawl under Harry’s skin, possess him, like a parasite — *always and always* and —

God, he needed to get a grip.

In one swift movement, his tie was around his neck. Harry’s eyes were wary now, slightly hurt, perhaps, but Tom’s fingers never wavered or fumbled as he dressed.

Taking a long breath, he forced his face into a smile. ‘Do you want to

use your cloak or chance it?'

Harry chewed his lip, ran a hand through his mess of maddening hair. 'Chance it,' he said, smoothing down his robes. 'Oh, and you've got a mark on your neck. Just there. Sorry.'

Tom's fingers jumped to his skin and he almost closed his eyes. Exhaling raggedly through his nose, he vanished it.

Harry gave him another odd glance which Tom ignored. He didn't want to look at Harry. It made him feel winded. *Sick.* In one steady motion, he pulled open the door, squared his shoulders and walked forward.

Weasley and Granger looked identical when they were angry. This thought came to Tom with vague amusement as he glanced down the corridor where they had cornered him.

'Polite, as always I see,' Tom began, tactfully ignoring how Weasley poked around in his robes for a wand. 'Is this the moment where we put the past aside and become friends?'

'You need to stop fucking around with Harry,' Weasley said. His voice was vibrating with anger. Two minutes, Tom imagined, until he truly exploded.

'Fucking *around*?' Tom arched an eyebrow, mimicking confusion. 'Or just fucking?'

Weasley made a jerky movement forward and Granger grabbed his arm. What *imbeciles.*

'You're disgusting,' Weasley spat, glancing down the empty corridor.

'The feeling's mutual, I assure you.' Tom gave them a scrutinising look. This whole thing was pathetic. Did they *really* think they were going to intimidate him?

'Tell me, Ron, do you honestly believe Harry's any better than me? If it's all so disgusting—'

A wand pointed directly between his eyes. Weasley's hand shook.

Trembled. *Hatred,* Tom thought, and no, not just hatred —*fear.*

A jerk of his finger and Tom send the wand clattering to the floor. The sound was loud in the empty corridor: a bounce, a thud, silence.

'*Don't* test me,' Tom said quietly. Weasley lunged for his wand, straightened up and eyed him warily. Granger's face was set.

'Do you have any idea how *easily* I could ruin your lives?' Tom smiled coldly. 'And expulsion? Don't make me laugh. Even if it was linked back to me, though that itself would be near impossible, I've achieved what I wanted at Hogwarts now. It would be worth it.'

'Except you wouldn't,' Granger said sharply. 'You won't do anything to us, Riddle, because Harry would never forgive you.'

Tom laughed. 'What do you think I am, his *pet?* Harry doesn't control what I do. And anyway—it would only be too late when he found out.'

He liked the way they stiffened. It helped him ignore how the words felt, and the bitter thing that was stirring in his gut.

Just when had Harry crept into his life? Invasive. Insidious. Permanent. Not something Tom wanted to give up. Not something he *had* to either.

But could he?

'Was that all?' Tom straightened up. He was used to obsession, even if this particular one was morphing into a *need.* 'We don't all spend the day waltzing around the castle, you know. I have things to do.'

Tom gave them a final look: sunny, mocking. He wondered if this would get back to Harry and if it would bite him in the face. Since when did he *care?*

He turned away from them in one smooth motion, footsteps loud against the stone floor. Their scowls were burning into the back of his head but even that didn't bring the satisfaction it should.

Tom turned the corner sharply, veering past a group of Hufflepuffs who giggled at his passing, whispering among themselves.

This truly was becoming an awful day.

Harry was having a great day. Excluding Tom's weirdness (twitchy, unsettled, bolting from the common room with vague mutters about the Chamber of Secrets), Harry felt lighter than he had in a long time.

The tension with Ron and Hermione was starting to thaw, more so when they found out they still had things in common. It was never going to go back to normal, and yet Harry didn't feel bittersweet for the things of the past. His gratitude came in a rush, relief bringing a near-euphoria.

Now they were making their way through the grounds, Ron and Hermione with their elbows looped, Hermione's hair flying in the wind. It was twilight. The rain had eased and the sky was pale and pinkish. Harry's face was flush from the cold and his steps were quick.

'Riddle was being a prick today,' Ron said, and for some reason, he looked slightly nervous.

Harry didn't falter, though the words came as a surprise. 'Oh?' he said, keeping his voice light. Tom was not an argument he wanted to get into again. 'He spoke to you?'

'Well, not quite … 'Ron shook his head. 'Forget it. I just think you can do better.'

'I don't *want* to do better. And what did he do?'

Ron glanced at Hermione, who had averted her eyes to the trodden path. 'Just being a dick, is all. It was really nothing. *Anyway* —'he cleared his throat— 'did you do that homework for Merrythought?'

Harry's shoulders loosened. He didn't like the fact Tom and his friends interacted. And Ron —from his evasive tone —had clearly induced the encounter.

He wouldn't start an argument now though. Staring off at the Lake, dark and gleaming as oil, Harry felt the tension in his chest ease.

'Not yet,' he said, and, turning around, 'do you want to go to the library?'

Tom's weirdness disappeared the next day and Harry knew better than to broach it. Things had settled so nicely between them —*settled*, for the first time in forever—that he didn't want to chance the previous discord arising. He filed it to a small, befuddled part of his mind and things went back to normal. Harry observed Tom, more acutely than he ever had before.

There were so many things he hadn't been aware of. Little things he had never registered, like the way Tom was moody in the mornings, groggy and curt and barely held together until eleven o'clock. It was subtle, barely detectable, strangely human. He was as obsessed with reading as Hermione was, always with a book, always making notes in a long, loose hand, eyebrows knitted, legs stretched out. When he wasn't talking to Harry, he was in the library or the chamber. He tolerated Professor Slughorn a lot more than he liked to admit; practised magic for hours at a time, absorbed and focused, fascinating to watch.

It was a strange discovery. Harry felt it settle alongside all the other information he had, smaller, more personal, filling out the image in his mind.

But when he jumped up in bed that night, Harry wasn't thinking about Tom at all. His fingers went immediately for his wand, groping in the dark until he found it. He put his glasses on though they made no difference. The darkness was thick, impenetrable, and his curtains were tightly shut.

Sitting there, back pressed against the headboard, Harry's heart hammered. There was no fog of sleep clouding his thoughts, no nightmares flashing through his mind. Yet he was cold.

Harry raised his fingers to his forehead and the scar there was cold too. His ears strained at every noise in the dorm, every shuffle in the dark. Chewing his lip, Harry stood.

Was it Tom?

He paused outside those curtains. It was absurd. It was nonsense. Harry hesitated, wand bobbing, holding his breath.

A jolt of pain flashed through his head—a fierce, white-hot pain, like heat rushing through his body, sensation coming back, electrocution —-and the curtains flew open.

Tom's eyes were strangely unfocused. He stared at Harry, hair askew, feet bare against the wood.

It took Harry a second to realise Tom's eyes were locked on his wand.

'What was it?' Harry said quietly. He lowered his wand, the flare of pain already ebbing away.

Tom's expression cleared and he blinked. 'Dumbledore,' he said. 'I saw him die.'

'You saw …'

Harry looked around the darkened dorm, knowing his voice would never be quiet enough. The prickle of unease came back, and he shifted from foot to foot.

Tom looked at him, eyes still bright, and nodded. He sat back on his bed, long legs against the floor, and gestured him forward.

Harry avoided Tom's trunk and the floorboard that creaked. His wand shone over the duvet, the thick green curtains, Tom's pale hand resting on the sheets.

'You saw him die,' Harry said, when they were both sitting on the bed, the curtains drawn. Despite the silencing charm he had cast, Harry's voice was low.

Tom's shoulder was pressed against Harry's. There wasn't room for two people in a four-poster, especially when they were sitting up. Harry had placed his wand down, and the light it emitted was weak. He could see the shape of Tom, half-masked, legs now folded underneath him.

'On the Astronomy Tower,' Tom said. 'He died in *Hogwarts*. Isn't that ironic?'

Tom's voice was scratchy from sleep —endearing, Harry thought, in its vulnerability. Underneath it though, was a hushed excitement that made Harry shift in place.

'He stood there and did nothing. It was pitiful. Did Dumbledore weaken in his old age? Or is his wandless magic really that poor?' Tom shook his head. 'Who was the man that killed him? I've seen him before.'

‘That’s Snape,’ Harry said. ‘He was a professor at Hogwarts.’

‘And the blonde boy?’

‘Abraxas’ grandson.’

The night came back to Harry. Malfoy’s pinched expression, his hands trembling. The sky lit up, the Dark Mark hanging overhead. The way he had stood under the cloak, immobile, limbs burning to move, needing it, more than anything else in his life. How Dumbledore had toppled backwards, as if in slow-motion, broken body swooping and disappearing over the edge. Harry, with his knees on the wet grass, leaning over Dumbledore, stars glinting above.

‘I guess Abraxas was loyal to me once,’ Tom said. ‘Though his grandson seems equally cowardly.’

—Harry, lips moving soundlessly. Hagrid and fire and Snape, and *dead dead dead.*

‘Death Eaters invaded Hogwarts,’ Tom continued, ‘and Dumbledore was killed, so I suppose it was successful.’ He had a funny look on his face, slightly dazed.

Harry looked down at the duvet and Tom’s knee which was pressed against his own. He leaned away.

‘I saw him,’ Tom said. ‘Voldemort.’

Harry glanced up. ‘Where?’

‘He was duelling Dumbledore. The ministry, perhaps. It was glorious.’

‘He lost that duel.’

‘Still, *Dumbledore’s* the one who ended up dead in the end.’

Harry’s lips twisted at the tone—so wistful, so impressed. ‘And you know what happened next, Tom? Voldemort possessed me and my godfather died. It was one of the worst days of my life. Everything bad in my life stems from Voldemort and you think he’s so inspiring –’

‘Why take it so personally? *I* don’t want to kill you.’ Tom said it quietly, warily, making Harry’s breath catch.

How had they even gotten into this mess? How were they here, shrouded in darkness, unbearably close, unable to fully separate?

‘That’s not the point,’ Harry said. ‘You admire him. You want to be *that.’*

‘Not entirely. I’m not going to make the same mistakes he did, I’ll be better.’

‘You wouldn’t even know you’re making them.’

He imagined it as Tom must have seen it— Dumbledore and Voldemort, a blaze of magic in the golden atrium.

‘Voldemort ruined my life,’ Harry said quietly. ‘You must have felt that on the tower. He took away *everything,* and I’m never going to sympathise with your desire to be that. Because he killed and destroyed and …’

Harry shook his head. Tom would never understand it. Tom wouldn’t care. *C*ouldn't. It was who he was, who Harry had grown to like, a monster posing as a person.

‘I’m going back to bed,’ Harry said. ‘Tell me if you dream of your *death*.’ He lifted his wand, the flood of light temporarily bouncing off Tom’s face, casting broken shadows along the curtains.

‘*Wait.’*

Tom had grabbed Harry’s wrist but he dropped it now, as if scalded. Harry paused.

‘We’re not going to agree about Voldemort,’ Tom said finally. He shifted, staring at Harry intently.

‘So, I should be okay with you wanting to be the thing that takes over the Wizarding World and kills everyone I love?’

‘It’s not going to happen the way it did before. You don’t even have a godfather anymore.’

‘It’s not about that,’ Harry said. ‘You saw how bad it was and you don’t care. You want to kill thousands of people and let it happen again—even worse than it was before. You see Voldemort and you admire him *more.’*

Tom was silent. Running his fingers along the duvet, Harry felt detached.

It wasn’t an argument they could solve, not without ending it all. Yet

didn't Harry still have the right to be annoyed? Even if they decided to lay it aside, to keep this tentative thing they had, wasn't it only fair?

Harry could feel the heat of Tom from where he sat, the closeness. It made his throat close. In the darkness, with the curtains pulled shut, everything was surreal.

'I wouldn't go after you the way he did,' Tom said. 'Not anymore.'

'Yeah, you would. If you were feeling spiteful enough and we had —' Harry caught himself before he said, *broken up*.

'I wouldn't right now. Doesn't that matter at all? Because if you start trying to dissect my future actions, speculating on how things may go and how it compares to your time, we're only going to argue.'

'Yeah.' Harry chewed his lip. The impermanence of it had never felt stronger than it did then, never hurt as much. 'Let's just forget it.'

He ran a hand through his hair, trying to make out Tom's expression in the dark. 'I'll see you in the morning. It's what —four?'

'Closer to five, I'd say.'

Harry yawned, moving forward to push open the curtains. He was unable to resist the next question that came to his mind.

'Did you see what he looked like? Voldemort?'

Tom jolted. 'Yeah,' he said, lips twisting. 'You weren't joking about the mess I became.'

'And you want to make the same amount of horcruxes again?'

Tom hesitated. 'Voldemort was hit by a killing curse,' he said smoothly. 'That was the cause of his new form.'

Harry shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'I saw a memory —Dumbledore's. You were still recognisable, but your face … it was so waxy and white. As though it had faded, or distorted, and was barely held together. You looked *sickly.'*

'I need to make the horcruxes, Harry,' Tom said. 'I can't die.*'*

'You already have two. Splitting your soul only makes it more unstable. Not stronger. *Weaker.'*

‘Or you could be lying.’

They looked at each other, pausing.

‘You’re so afraid of dying,’ Harry said, ‘and obsessed with conquering death. But you've *already* conquered it. Twice.’

‘With objects you know of.’ Tom’s smile was dry. ‘If it is true, and the horcruxes leave me weaker, I won’t make as many. I’ll hide them better.’ He shifted slightly, as if uneasy.

Harry thought of how it must be to fear death like that, to obsess over it to such a degree.

‘You know, the muggle war ends next year.’

‘And?’

Harry shrugged, pretending he didn’t notice how Tom’s voice had become guarded.

‘Nothing. I just remembered.’

Harry hadn’t quite made it out of the four-poster and was playing with the curtain that separated them from the rest of the dorm.

‘I have no interest in muggle affairs,’ Tom said shortly.

Harry made a noncommittal noise, glancing at him. ‘I know.’

He thought of Wools and how it made Tom stiffen. Thought of his desire to change himself, to wash away every reminder of his muggle past. Harry knew that Tom was aware of his thoughts too.

‘It was recent,’ Tom said then. ‘Dumbledore’s death.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said, and smiled. ‘Probably why I’m so attached to him now, right?’

‘Probably,’ Tom agreed, and they fell into silence.

Harry yawned. After the intensity of his awakening, and the conversation with Tom, his tiredness had come back in full force. He reached out and touched Tom absently — his knee, solid, real, reassuring — and moved to push open the curtains.

‘You can stay. If you want.’

Harry stilled.

Tom said it quietly. His voice was smooth, nonchalant, yet the pause that followed betrayed the true weight that he had tried so hard to mask.

Harry stared at him in the dark, swallowing. ‘Okay.’

Tom didn’t come up with an excuse. *It’s freezing tonight; you might wake someone up.* He didn’t say, *don’t go* either.

Harry let the light of his wand snuff out and they were in blackness. He lay on his side — there wasn’t room otherwise, not without an elbow jammed in his face — and pulled the duvet over him.

Tom shifted, a shape in the darkness. His breath tickled Harry’s face and their knees knocked together. It probably should have been unpleasant, the warmth, the proximity, how they were pressed so close.

Harry closed his eyes, listening to the slow, even sound of Tom’s breathing. His insides felt like they were knotted. He wanted to both draw Tom closer and push him away. But he was too tired to focus on the way it made his chest hurt; too tired to think about how much he liked Tom. It was a fact, sour in his throat, true, obvious, overwhelming. Why fight it?

‘Night, Harry,’ Tom said, his voice thick with tiredness.

Harry hummed in reciprocation, touching Tom’s arm which lay sprawled between them. As if inspired by the brief contact, Tom shifted forward, curling his fingers under Harry’s t-shirt and tugging him even closer.

Harry’s heart stuttered at the action. Tom had practically burrowed into his neck, an arm flung around him. Harry's pulse spiked —*thump, thump, thump* —as Tom mumbled something absently against his skin. He sounded half-asleep.

For a moment Harry lay there, allowing the sensation to flood him. He wanted to memorise it. Despite his desire to stay awake, however, eventually Harry’s awareness lulled until there was only one thought, one fleeting sensation before he drifted off, and that was of the way Tom had curled so tightly against him.

Unity

There was a heavy weight flung over his chest. Without opening his eyes, Harry pushed it away. The weight resisted — curling around his stomach, tight and possessive. At the same time, its owner made a low, disgruntled noise and nuzzled deeper into his neck.

Harry opened his eyes to the weak light of the morning. Tom was half-lying on his chest, an arm pinning him in place, using Harry as a sort of makeshift pillow. Tom didn't make any more noise, nor loosen the hold he had on him. He shuffled against Harry's neck, breath damp and hot, before finally settling.

Staring at the ceiling, Harry's lips twitched. He lay there for a moment —content despite the heavy weight of Tom—until the matter of his bladder became more apparent.

Harry gently prised Tom's fingers off him. Tom made another annoyed noise and pressed his lips to Harry's neck, whose pulse spiked at the contact. Tom didn't notice. Apart from the initial resistance, he was slack and pliant. Shifting away, Harry sat up.

Tom was *asleep.* Face soft, eyes shut, frowning ever so slightly.

Harry's heart gave a great jump as he looked at him. He wanted to laugh, or perhaps take a photo, but he could only stare.

Carefully, Harry pulled the blanket over Tom's exposed shoulder. Still sleeping, Tom reached out and yanked it closer to him. Harry looked at him a moment longer, his mouth tugging upwards.

Tom looked so *nice* when he was sleeping, and Harry could drink in the image in a way he never could when Tom was awake. Still somehow, despite the relaxed, slack expression on his face, there was something intimidating about Tom. Something that made Harry's breath catch.

From the straight line of his nose to the swoop of his high cheekbone, and the long, loose curl that fell into his eyes, he was devastatingly handsome. Impossibly so. Reaching out a hand, Harry carefully smoothed back the hair that fell into Tom's face. He held his breath but Tom didn't stir at the contact. His eyebrows had smoothed out, his eyes still shut.

Harry touched Tom's face, very lightly. He traced his fingers over Tom's skin, warm, flawless, and listened to the even sounds of his breathing.

Harry wanted to embed the image into his mind — the dark slant of his eyelashes, the slight pout of his bottom lip. After a long moment where he simply ran his fingers along Tom's hair and cheek, Harry got up.

Just how would Tom react if he woke to Harry *staring* at him?

Harry would never live that one down. Giving Tom a final look —a long arm flung out, the path of a delicate blue vein mapping it — Harry reluctantly left.

The dormitory was dark and quiet. Saturday. Avery had spilled half a bottle of ink on the wooden floor and it gleamed in the green light. Harry reached the bathroom, glanced back at the haphazard, darkened dorm, and smiled.

'So, you and Tom,' Abraxas said when they were seated at the Slytherin table. It was just the two of them, along with a smattering of younger students, who were having a heated debate about goblin rebellions. Abraxas' face was schooled into a mask of deliberate innocence, though the twitching of his lips ruined the effect.

'Yeah?' Harry said, reaching across the table for the stack of toast and feigning just as much innocence as Abraxas was.

'You're awfully close these days.'

'I suppose,' Harry agreed.

'Are you *grinning?'*

Harry touched his face. 'No,' he lied, though his smile only grew.

'You are! You're such a secretive git too — '

Harry snorted. 'And what? You want to know all the details?'

'No, I just … it's Tom, you know? And you and him —god, you're so

close. You argue all the time, and yet, I've never seen him pay as much attention to *anything.'*

'We don't argue that much,' Harry said.

'You were arguing about jam the other day, Harry. *Jam.'*

'It was a perfectly normal conversation.'

Abraxas made a doubtful noise in his throat. 'I'm just saying, it's a big difference to the usual fighting. Kinda spooky, actually.'

'Thanks, Abraxas,' Harry said dryly. 'That was our intention — creeping you out.'

Abraxas laughed at him. 'Oh, shut up.'

The bell rang signalling the end of potions, and Harry packed his bag slowly. Tom was chatting to one of the Ravenclaw Prefects, a mousy-haired, long-nosed boy with tortoiseshell glasses and a mottled red complexion. Harry shoved his scales into his bag.

The weekend had passed in a pleasant blur. With Christmas coming up, decorations had started to appear around the castle —tinsel on the suits of armour, streams of holly and mistletoe lining the stairs, their berries trodden on the stone steps. Harry's mind wandered to the array of festive dishes served in the Hall, and he made his way quickly towards the door.

'Harry? Would you stay behind a moment, please?'

Harry turned to meet Professor Slughorn. Tom stopped too, a slight frown gracing his face.

'Do you want me to wait?' he said, pausing his conversation.

Harry shook his head. 'It's fine,' he said, and couldn't suppress a small smile. 'I'll see you later.'

When the door closed and the last of the students left, Harry turned around. 'Yes, sir?'

Professor Slughorn gestured him forward. ‘So polite, my boy. I thought we should have a chat. How’s Slytherin treating you these days? You’ve been with us a while now — I’m glad to see you settling in.’

‘It’s fine,’ Harry said. ‘Good.’

‘And that awful business of Grindelwald is dealt with — ‘he shook his head— ‘truly, truly awful circumstances that brought you here.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said, dropping his eyes to the floor in a display of sorrow.

Professor Slughorn was going around the class, levitating loose ingredients into the store cupboard and cleaning desks. When Harry offered to help, he nodded vigorously.

‘You’re getting along well with Mr Malfoy, aren’t you?’ Slughorn said.

Harry, while sending a burst of magic towards a desk caked with frog intestines, nodded. ‘He’s a good friend.’

He kept his answers vague, letting Professor Slughorn get to the root of why he had kept him there. Was it *really* just for a chat?

‘Very unlike the rest of the Malfoys, certainly,’ Slughorn said, and there was no telling whether he viewed that as a good or bad thing. He gave his wand an elaborate flourish: a row of crystal phials bobbed towards the store cupboard, glinting in the streaky light.

‘And Miss Lestrange.’ Slughorn hummed. ‘She’s a bit of a black sheep too. I must say, you know how to pick them, Harry. Indeed … and I’m happy to see Mr Malfoy with a friend …’

Harry said nothing. He felt a stirring of defensiveness at the way Slughorn had worded it. He hadn’t chosen his friends out of *pity*.

‘I wasn’t sure how you’d get along in this house, Harry. I knew it would be interesting, certainly, but I have to admit I was worried. You came here, very quiet, very reserved, very troubled — carrying so much hardship that my Slytherins have never had to face. At least not yet.’

His lips twisted at the inevitability of it. ‘I could tell you were different from them. They sensed it too. You were above the little trifles that consume their days. And you were unbending, unwilling to

settle into the ways of the house. It made me uneasy.'

Harry took a moment to digest the speech. *The little trifles,* he thought, and carefully met Slughorn's eyes.

'You mean, the whole pureblood ideology that's happening in your house, sir?'

Slughorn's eyes widened a fraction, and he gave a short, uncomfortable laugh.

'Nothing gets past you, does it? Though I wouldn't say that's what's going on … their families, you know … very strong views, horrible, horrible … 'he cleared his throat.

Harry watched Professor Slughorn carefully. 'You mean then,' he said, slower this time, more deliberate, 'that they all obey Tom?'

He knew he had hit the mark by the way Slughorn's smile widened.

'Tom,' Slughorn said, seizing the topic instantly. 'Nonsense, my boy, they admire him, that is all. And isn't he admirable? A fine student, I must say. Very, very much so.'

Harry couldn't hide his smirk. Of course this whole thing was about *Tom.*

'He's alright, I suppose.'

Professor Slughorn's eyes boggled. 'You get along well though, yes? It would sure be a pity otherwise … '

Harry refused to relent like Slughorn wanted him to. He pushed in one of the chairs, the tidying up complete, and did his best impression of nonchalance.

'Yeah, we get along.'

Slughorn's smile was practically *roguish* and Harry wanted the ground to swallow him up. He cleared his throat, staring at a rather fascinating burn on the nearby desk.

'Practically thick as thieves, the two of you.'

'I wouldn't go that far.'

'You wouldn't? Why, I'm glad to see it anyway, you know, very glad

indeed. Tom's brilliant— absolutely brilliant — but he's rather rigid in his ideas. Rarely allowing himself the opportunity to do so much as *see* another perspective. You know he wanted to teach here - at Hogwarts?' Slughorn had come forward, earnestly, as if this moment was of great importance. 'He's still not over that rejection, I'm afraid.'

His eyes raked Harry's face, a second longer than necessary. It hung there, between them —the uncertainty, the unease, all the cracks in Slughorn's rose-tinted perception that he fought so hard to bury.

Tom Riddle asking him about horcruxes, an innocent smile playing around his lips.

Tom and the house. The sycophantic students, voices low and confidential.

All secrets and denial and moments of uncertainty that he would never admit.

Harry swallowed under the weight of that gaze. He wished he could tell him. *You let it happen once. Ignoring the truth until it was too late, hiding when it came back to haunt you.*

Was he seeking assurance that he was wrong? Or were the seeds of doubt too great to ignore and he wished to pass them onto Harry?

'Well, as you said, sir, he's rigid. I'm sure you know better than I do.'

Slughorn exhaled heavily and the moment passed.

Harry tried to give him a reassuring smile but it ended up like a grimace. Didn't he have enough responsibility without Slughorn adding to it as well?

'Well, I'm sure he'll go far. I'm sure *you'll* go far too, Harry, just mark my words.'

'Thanks, sir,' Harry said. 'I should probably get to lunch.'

'Of course, of course, I'm sure your friends will be wondering where you are —and Tom, too. He's very fond of you, if I'm not mistaken.'

Heat rushed into Harry's cheeks at the knowing look. He gave Slughorn a hasty goodbye, got a confiding grin in return, and retreated quickly from the classroom.

God, Tom was going to love this.

‘He said *what?’*

Tom discarded the remains of his lunch when Harry entered the Hall, his attention solely on him. Harry —who had slipped into the seat across from him—smirked.

‘It was all an elaborate ploy to talk about you,’ he said. ‘Which you’ll be pleased to hear.’

‘Really?’

‘Sadly so. He basically wanted me to … admit my intense longing for you or something. It was weird.’

The wording of it made Tom smirk. Harry glanced at him, while spooning stew onto his plate, and added, ‘not that that’s true.’

‘Of course not,’ Tom replied. ‘It’s more of an infatuation, if anything.’

‘Yeah right. You should have fun telling Slughorn *that.’*

Harry smiled at him — rather softly, Tom thought, all bright-eyed and warm and amused. Tom wanted to capture that expression, freeze it somehow, because Harry rarely viewed him with such tender affection.

‘Hey, Tom,’ Avery said suddenly, leaning across the table. ‘Did you see the prophet this morning? About the vampires?’

Obviously.

‘Yes,’ Tom said, disgruntled at the interruption. He would have been a fool to miss the blazing headline: two murders in Knockturn Alley, bodies drained of blood. Explicit. Obvious. Their haphazard fight for better rights was escalating. It had piqued Tom’s interest immensely.

‘Nasty, right? Say, my father reckons they’re picking off the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.’ The glee in his voice could not have been more apparent. ‘So, what do you think? Edgecomb next?’

‘Can’t you see I’m busy?’

Avery faltered. Harry's eyebrows shot up his forehead, and he paused, fork halfway to his mouth.

'Oh, right, sorry, my … sorry.' Avery shot Harry a look, his jaw tensing. Harry met his eyes impassively, daring him to say something.

'Edgecomb will most certainly not be next,' Tom said, amending his bluntness. 'Someone with less status, I imagine.'

'Yeah,' Avery agreed, a relieved look crossing his face. He leaned back into his seat, turning to talk with Rosier instead.

Tom put down his knife and fork. Harry gave him an odd look — half-flattered, half-amused.

'Don't,' Tom began, before Harry opened his mouth.

'I wasn't going to — 'Harry paused. Grinned. 'You really need to start being nicer to people.'

'I'll take it into consideration.'

He wouldn't.

Harry and Tom rounded the corner and almost collided with Ron and Hermione. For a split second, all four of their expressions were identical. Tom recovered the quickest. The surprise vanished from his face at once, and his back straightened.

Harry's grin slipped. 'Hey,' he said, ignoring the traitorous way his heart jumped.

'Harry,' Hermione said, blinking quickly. Her bag was slung over her shoulder, the edge of a textbook peeking from it. 'Tom.'

'Hermione,' Tom said, in the same level tone she used. 'Ron, too.'

Subconsciously, Harry shifted away from Tom, putting a little more distance between them. Immediately after, he felt guilty. Ron and Hermione *knew* now —so why did he still feel the need to hide it?

'We were just going to the common room,' Harry said, when the

silence lasted a moment longer than was comfortable.

‘Yeah, uh … same.’ Ron grimaced, watching Tom warily. ‘See you later then, mate.’

‘Wait,’ Hermione said suddenly. ‘I wanted to tell you something.’ She smoothed her hands over her robes, eyes flickering towards Tom. ‘Dumbledore was talking to us. And he wanted to see you. It’s about … ‘

Her pause was a long, uncertain thing.

‘About?’ Harry prompted, but Hermione only shook her eyes, watching Tom.

Tom smiled thinly at her. ‘Grindelwald? Transfiguration? Setting up a force to defeat Voldemort?’

She reeled backwards. ‘You,’ she began. ‘How can you —'

‘Yeah, Tom, it’s not funny,’ Harry replied. ‘I’m sure Dumbledore’s already decided it’s my job to murder you.’

‘Harry,’ Hermione said. ‘What — you can’t say —'

Harry shared a look with Tom, whose lips curved in amusement.

‘Oh, right, silly me,’ Harry said. ‘Just pretend you didn’t hear that.’

‘Hear what?’ Tom feigned a puzzled look. ‘Anyway, Granger … you were saying?’

Hermione looked torn. She gave Harry a baffled look, eyes wide and disbelieving. Then, turning to Ron, who looked equally stumped, she said, ‘it’s about the time-turner. And what we’re going to … do with it.’

She looked at Tom, her mistrust apparent. Tom flashed her a grin in response.

‘Isn’t it broken?’

‘It’s none of your business, Riddle,’ Ron spat.

Harry frowned at the venom in his tone. ‘Ron,’ he began, rather weakly. ‘It’s —'

‘*—Nothing to do with him!’*

‘I know, but you don’t have to …’ Harry shook his head. ‘Nevermind. Bicker it out among yourselves. I don’t care anymore.’

‘No, Harry, wait,’ Hermione said, seizing his arm when he moved to pass by.

Harry shook her off. What was the point? They were never going to get along. He could never have *both,* not without having to juggle them in unison, to split himself in two, all the while knowing that they resented each other.

‘Tell Dumbledore I’ll talk to him after Transfiguration,’ Harry said. ‘And anyway, Tom’s right. It’s broken. So what does he want?’

‘He feels bad, I think,’ Hermione said. She was chewing her lip, now focusing solely on Harry. ‘Which is understandable —'

Tom scoffed and they all turned to stare at him.

‘Dumbledore wants to give you a speech about his failure to help? When has he ever given you *anything* that isn’t vague answers and riddles, or, better yet, manipulating you into doing it for him?’

Harry rubbed his arm uncomfortably. ‘It’s not like that.’

Ron cleared his throat. ‘Er — *yes, it is.* I don’t want to agree with … him … *at all …’*

‘—thanks, Weasley.’

‘But seriously, Harry, I’m so *sick* of Dumbledore acting like he knows any better than us. Or, since we once confided in him, pretending we’re all in this together. What has he lost? *Nothing.*’

‘You can’t blame him for the past,’ Harry said, ‘or anything that happened in our time.’

‘Yeah, that was all —'Ron stopped, looking like he had just swallowed something unpleasant.

‘Yes?’ Tom said, smiling innocently.

‘Oh, *fuck you,* Riddle!’

‘Ron! Don’t antagonise him. Please.’ Hermione gave Harry a

despairing look, who only shrugged.

‘I don’t know why you think either of them are going to listen to me. It’s pretty clear you’ll never set it aside.’

A frown crossed her face, perhaps at the resignation in his voice. Harry didn’t bother trying to mask it. After telling them that he would visit Dumbledore later, he set off down the corridor.

The stained-glass windows were casting slants of pink light on the stone floor and the portrait frames were empty. Harry and Tom walked until they rounded the corner.

‘That was such a disaster,’ Harry said, descending the winding staircase.

‘Your friends dislike me more than I do them,’ Tom said. ‘Which is quite remarkable, really.’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said bitterly. ‘It’s hilarious.’

They didn’t meet anyone on the stairs. Tom, hands stuffed in his pocket, lazily matching Harry’s strides, said, ‘it could be worse. I don’t think they’re going to do much more than glare at me for now.’

Harry hummed. ‘Thanks for not escalating it. I know you probably wanted to.’

Tom paused for a second but didn’t glance over at him. ‘It’s alright. It would only end up tying back to you.’

‘Yeah, but … ‘

Harry cleared his throat. He hoped Tom understood that he appreciated it, nevertheless; hoped the silence could convey all the things he wanted to say.

‘Thanks.’

For Tom, Friday meant an array of mundane activities. He had a meeting that involved listening to the various complaints the prefects brought to him, all the while humming sympathetically; Professor

Slughorn wanted to discuss Ancients Runes and probe into Tom's personal life, eyes twinkling, fingers loose around a glass of elf-made wine. And there were Death Eater meetings which were becoming fewer. Plans that were only vague outlines in his head, floating past in minutes of solitude, detached and fleeting.

Tom stretched his fingers out against the desk. The charms classroom was abuzz with noise and pale winter sunlight streamed through the open windows. Outside, a cluster of students made their way to Herbology, breath hanging like mist in the air, hands stuffed in pockets.

It *had* been a while, Tom thought, since he'd called a Death Eater meeting. And worse, when was the last time he had done something for his future? Nonsense meetings with Slughorn didn't count. Neither did learning magic, that had always been a past-time of his.

After the Chamber and the horcruxes (both of which took at least six months to create), Tom hadn't let these plans occupy his time. There had been Harry. He had quickly overridden everything else, and that obsessive urge to know — that dark, breath-catching thing, that nestled and writhed in his mind— had been all there was.

But now?

'Miss Lestrange? Could you repeat what you said please?'

Professor Flitwick was standing on a podium of books, his voice as squeaky as the chalk that flew across the board. Belinda cleared her throat, saying her answer a little louder, though still perfectly monotonous.

A small frown crossed Tom's face.

It was more difficult now, having to juggle two things at once. It shouldn't have been — after all, Voldemort wasn't something he bothered to conceal — yet the fact nagged at him. Somehow, unknown to both of them, things had shifted beneath the surface. Voldemort and Harry? They very clearly *didn't* fit together.

'Hey, Tom,' Abraxas said, turning around in his seat. His voice was low, his quill half-crushed into the table, leaving a smear of black ink. 'Do you think Harry'll … 'he paused. Flitwick was passing by them, glancing at the notes they had written.

'Harry will what?'

Abraxas' eyes were on the other side of the classroom. Harry, talking to Weasley, both of them a little stiff, though nothing like it had been before. Harry and Weasley, with the beginning of grins on their faces, small and cautiously hopeful.

'Do you think he'll distance himself? Now that he's friends with them again?'

God, Abraxas was such a nervous wreck.

'No,' Tom said, firmer than he felt.

'You don't think … I mean, they clearly disapprove, and they're his *best friends* — he likes them so much. And compared to me, they've been through so much together. He'd pick them in a heartbeat. It wouldn't even be a choice.'

'Are you *planning* on making Harry choose between you and his friends?'

'No.' He chewed his lip. 'No, but … they're Gryffindors, you know. It's different.'

Tom didn't say anything. *Abraxas* certainly had nothing to worry about. He would probably start crying at the first sign of conflict, instantly making Harry wilt.

'Then don't say something to offend them. It's easy.'

They both looked across the classroom. Harry had his head down — he was speaking in a low voice, looking meaningfully at Granger. All three of them were leaning together, so much that Granger's hair tickled Harry's cheek and Weasley's shoulder brushed Harry's.

Tom glanced away.

'You worry too much,' he said to Abraxas. 'Go and ask him if you're so concerned about it.'

Tom stared down at the ring on his finger, running his fingers over the cold stone. The horcrux didn't draw him the way Harry's did; there was no pull, no presence, no tantalising need to bring it close. It just felt like a ring.

Harry wouldn't, not without a reason. And yet, if he had one, because he would; they had always known …

No, that was madness. Thoughts of insecurity were malignant things. Uneasiness seeping through the edges, thick and crude. And worse — worst of all — *doubt*.

How to have one without the other?

And how to have both?

'Mr Weasley and Mr Potter, save the talking for after class, please. Now … '

Tom watched Harry, a hot knot of jealousy twisting in his stomach. Abraxas had planted the seed of doubt but Tom was allowing it to grow. *Weasley and Granger*. What had they ever done for Harry anyway?

Weasley had cursed Harry in the face. Granger was prissy and disapproving, always forcing him to behave in a way that she saw fit. They didn't accept him without change, and yet his loyalty to them was unwavering, no matter how it should have strained and buckled.

Tom *longed* for it to be towards him instead. He loathed it.

Staring at Harry's tousled head, the stretch of classroom between them had never felt longer. He couldn't allow himself to get jealous, not now. After all, despite how deep Weasley and Granger sank their claws in, how tightly they clung to that shred of friendship, Harry was still *Tom's*.

And yet — if the choice was thrust upon him — was he really?

When the bell signalled the end of class, Tom crossed the room. It wasn't a competition — he knew that, wouldn't test it, *wouldn't* — but his lips were curving upwards, nevertheless, his heart quickening.

'Oh, hey,' Harry said, chewing his lip between his teeth. Weasley and Granger stiffened — a quick, instinctive thing that made Harry tense too. Then his shoulders loosened, almost defiantly. 'I saw you were talking to Abraxas. You looked… tortured.'

Tom wrinkled his nose. 'You don't even want to know,' he said. 'Honestly.' His insides warmed. Harry had looked over, despite the

intensity of his conversation. And despite the scowls now present on Weasley and Granger's faces, Harry's voice was light.

'I'll see you later,' he said to Weasley and Granger, shrugging apologetically. 'Do you want to meet in the library after dinner?'

Tom warmed at the careless action — a dismissal, veiled and polite though it was— and a rush of satisfaction overtook him. He levitated the rest of Harry's books into his bag with a snap of his fingers, causing Harry to give him a bemused look.

'You know, Tom,' he said, when they were out in the hallway. 'You were positively *glaring* at me across the classroom. I mean, I'm flattered and all —'

'I wasn't glaring at *you,'* Tom said, offended by the suggestion.

'Subtle.' Harry laughed. 'Honestly, you need to work on this whole jealousy thing.'

'I don't have a jealousy thing,' Tom said. 'It's more of a … strong dislike of everyone else.'

'Oh, right, that's much better. Including the Slytherins, I take it?'

'Obviously.'

'—but not Slughorn.'

'Why not Slughorn?'

Tom knew he had fallen for it when Harry stopped walking. There was a smirk on his face. His eyes glinted.

'Not this rubbish about us being friends,' Tom said. 'Seriously, Harry — '

Harry laughed. 'Right*,'* he said. 'I forgot— he's so *useful* and *influential.* You don't just like how he strokes your ego and tells you you're great all the time.'

Tom scoffed. What a disgustingly astute comment that was. 'Of course it's not,' he said. 'I don't need *Slughorn* to tell me I'm great.'

'Oh, seriously —'

Harry rolled his eyes when he saw the expression on Tom's face.

‘You’re joking, but you may as well admit it.’

‘What am I admitting again?’

The corridor was empty. There was a grin on Harry’s face — small and wry. Tom’s eyes lingered on his mouth, curved upwards, revealing a flash of white teeth.

‘How in love with yourself you are,’ Harry said. ‘Or your friendship with Slughorn. I’ll take either.’

Tom shook his head, eyes flickering back up. And oh, Harry had caught that glance. His grin twisted. Became a *smirk*.

‘Or,’ Tom began, voice lowering meaningfully. ‘You end that ridiculous train of thought and decide we do something better with our time.’

Harry’s eyes gleamed. ‘Like what? Chess*?’*

‘*Chess* is what you’ve decided? I wasn’t under the impression you enjoyed losing, but if you insist —'

‘On second thought—'Harry grabbed his wrist and yanked him forward— ‘there’s an empty classroom right here.’

The lights flared to life when they stepped inside, revealing a blackboard thick with dust and several broken desks.

‘So, no chessboard,’ Harry said, dropping Tom’s wrist. He walked forward, inspecting a splinter of wood that protruded from the end of a table.

‘Pity.’

Tom followed him with his eyes. There was something intriguing about Harry then; something which made his heart quicken. Abraxas’ words were still in his head — soft and sibilant — and Tom had the urge to draw Harry forward and reaffirm the fact that he was his.

‘I’m not having sex with you in an abandoned classroom.’

Harry said it nonchalantly. He had moved forward, so they were facing each other, and his eyes were steady on Tom's face.

‘Are you sure about that?’ Tom said, a teasing lilt to his voice.

‘Pretty sure. Unless *you* want to bend over that desk – ‘

Tom gave him a foul look, which made Harry laugh.

‘No? Oh, what a shame.’

‘Once again, you find yourself far too amusing.’

Tom wanted to tilt Harry’s head back and feel the jump of his pulse against his lips. *How dare he.* He wanted to press his fingers into Harry’s mouth, feel the slick heat, the wet press of tongue and teeth. *His, his, his.* Trace his fingers over every bump in his spine, every curve and dip in his smooth skin. *Brand it.* To bury his fingers in Harry’s hair, watch him lower to his knees, eyes half-lidded, cheeks hollowing out …

Harry clearly had other ideas.

‘You’re so obsessed with control,’ he said, leaning forward until his face was barely an inch away. ‘Even now.’

‘And yet you feel the desire to press me.’

Harry only hummed in agreement.

Another part of Tom — a darker, more obsessive part — yearned for the way Harry would arch beneath him. For the way he would come undone from Tom’s hands, his mouth. The *noise* he would make — a sort of half-gasp, becoming more and more broken. And then loudly, unabashed, clamping down on his bottom lip, shuddering, slick skin and murmurs and all the things they would never say another time.

It was absurd how desperate Harry was to balance out the dynamics in their relationship.

Tom should have cursed him for it but instead he laughed.

Harry had backed him against a wall — *that* made Tom’s mind wander to interesting places — and he was leaning into Tom’s space, lips parted. It was *adorable* how he thought he could be in control. As if Tom couldn’t change things the instant he grew restless.

Now, however, Tom’s heart piqued in interest. Harry’s breath fanned against his face, warm and sweet. He was smirking ever so slightly, eyes dark and obscenely green.

‘I find your stubbornness hilarious,’ Tom said dryly.

Harry scowled. ‘I’m not stubborn.’

‘Oh? What would you call it then? Persistent? Headstrong? Particularly *pig-headed?’*

Harry leaned into Tom’s space. ‘You only think that because you’re so obsessed with controlling everything in your life. You can’t deal with it, can you? Losing control?’

Tom’s lips twisted up. ‘I *don’t* lose control,’ he said. ‘Though it’s sweet that you think otherwise.’

He touched a finger to Harry’s cheek. Warm. They were close enough that he could feel the press of his body, could yank him forward by his tie and flip their position if he so much as wished.

‘I do think otherwise,’ Harry murmured.

Tom paused. He could manoeuvre it, yet he stopped. Waited.

Wasn’t Harry *his?*

Maddeningly infuriating, a teasing smile playing at his lips. Yet irrevocably, unwaveringly Tom’s.

‘Do I make you feel helpless, Harry?’ Tom traced his finger along the outline of Harry’s collar, crisp and white. Harry’s Adam’s apple jutted in his throat and Tom delicately grazed his fingers over it. ‘Is that it? You can’t stand giving in?’

‘Look at you — trying to bring this back to me.’ Harry smiled and leaned forward, lips almost brushing Tom’s. ‘Just *shut up* for a while. Have you ever considered that?’

The press of Harry’s lips was light. Tom made an unimpressed noise against them, wondering why on earth he was allowing this to escalate, and why he was so curious to see how far Harry dared take it.

Suppressing the urge to fist at Harry’s hair, Tom kissed him back. He would allow Harry to believe he had control for now. Harry was endearing when his face was alight with triumph. Disarming when he thought he had won.

A finger touched Tom’s hair.

Harry hummed against his mouth, lips curving upwards into a smile.

He pressed his knee against Tom's robes, the pressure light.

Tom would indulge him for now. His insides were already stirring at the unpredictability of it. And how he was going to flip it, of course, without Harry realising until it was too late —

Tom groaned at the grind of Harry's knee. The sound was involuntary. He stilled at once, pressing Harry's mouth harder against his own to make up for it.

Harry made a small, pleased noise in his throat — soft, barely there, *Tom's* — and Tom drew him even closer. The curiosity in his chest was a quiet, contemplative thing, and the warm heat of Harry's mouth overrode his ambivalence.

Tom kissed him more firmly, hands on Harry's jaw, tilting it to where he wanted. Harry batted his hands away.

They should probably go somewhere else, where the fear of interruption didn't hang between them. And yet his heart quickened, and he wasn't going to pull back, not now. His fingers ran over the nape of Harry's neck, and then forward, deftly loosening the knot of his tie, deepening the kiss, shifting against him.

The press of Harry's leg became a little firmer, no longer such a tease. Tom bit down on Harry's bottom lip, suppressing the desire to groan.

He knew, somewhere deep inside, that he wouldn't find Harry half as interesting if there wasn't an aspect of intrigue. He had always been drawn to the defiance. The way they clashed and disputed and balanced each other out. And while Harry was so lovely when he was *submissive*, something about him was equally charming now. Something that —

The door rattled and Harry jumped backwards with a curse.

'Oh, shit,' he breathed, straightening out his robes.

Tom stiffened at once. He adjusted his robes quickly and smoothed down his hair. They had barely a second to glance at each other before the door opened.

'Oh!' Abraxas said, eyes going wide. 'Sorry!'

Harry cleared his throat. His cheeks had darkened, and his hair was tousled from Tom running his fingers through it. 'What are you doing

here?' was the first thing that came out of his mouth.

Tom gave Abraxas a bored look, who was still standing on the threshold of the room. Abraxas looked startled.

'Oh,' he said, blinking quickly. 'I wanted an empty classroom to think. And maybe study. And you know —'He glanced fleetingly at Tom and then away.

'Yeah,' Harry said, shuffling on the spot. He shoved his hands in his pockets, adjusted his robes again. 'We were … practising spells.'

'Really?'

'*Yes,'* Tom said. 'Why, do you find that surprising?'

'No! Of course not —'

'The classroom's yours then,' Tom said mildly. 'We were just leaving.'

He suppressed the urge to give Abraxas a dark look, who was standing dumbstruck in the doorway. The remnants of their conversation from earlier stirred. Tom didn't want to probe into the connection between it and his desire to snog Harry in an empty room, too distracted to lock the door.

Harry nodded his head vigorously. He gave a hasty goodbye and bolted out the door. Giving Abraxas a final glance, Tom closed the door behind them.

'I guess your plan failed,' he said, when they were in the corridor. He looked around — empty, thankfully — and smoothed down his hair.

Harry groaned. '*Don't,'* he said, half-closing his eyes. 'I want to murder him.'

'Now you know what it feels like to be me.'

Harry laughed. His cheeks were still pink and he smiled at Tom ruefully. 'Yeah,' he said. 'But did you see his face?'

'Vividly.'

Harry grinned at him and Tom's lips reluctantly twitched. He could feel the interruption like an *ache,* and his head was still muggy with desire. How he wanted to press Harry to that wall and watch his eyes darken. Hear the way he would groan against him, soft and muffled.

Desire thundered through his blood, quickened his heart. *Harry, Harry, Harry.*

Harry who was his, *Tom's,* fleeting and fickle and never enough.

Harry touched his bottom lip and glanced around the corridor. 'So,' he began, giving Tom a meaningful look. 'Room of Requirement?'

It was much later when Tom made his way to the library. His footsteps were smooth, his shoulders set. The sound of quiet debate drifted through the halls, and through the yellow glow of the library windows, the silhouettes of students were visible, curled up in armchairs and leaned over desks, oblivious to the world.

Tom pulled down the wooden handle and stepped inside. A couple looked up as he passed, tired-eyed, curious. There was a rustle of turning pages and the scratch of quills on parchment.

Tom made his way through the shelves. There was no time for doubt or uncertainty. The distastefulness of what he was about to do followed him, but it was a small, fleeting thing, like the moment of preparation before unloading bad news.

Weasley and Granger sat at the back of the library. Their table was round, surrounded by high, sloping shelves that masked them from view. It seated four, though Weasley had placed his bag on one of the spare seats, and a great stack of parchment took up another.

Tom's nose wrinkled. Granger was absorbed in her work, hand flying steadily across a sheet of parchment, her fingers gleaming with ink. Weasley was staring at her, a sappy look on his face, while he played with a ball of screwed up paper. Presumably, he was thinking.

Tom stepped from behind the shelves.

'Weasley,' he said, because that was who looked up first. 'Granger.'

His lips curled when Weasley stood, immediately ready to argue.

'What do you want, Riddle?' Granger shoved away her parchment and straightened in her seat. 'We were meeting Harry in the library. Not you.'

‘Ah, yes, but isn’t this more interesting?’

‘*No.’*

‘Where is he?’

‘I’m sure he’ll come,’ Tom said evasively. ‘For some absurd reason, he enjoys your company. I imagine it’s a sentimental thing.’

Weasley gave him a look of utter loathing which Tom ignored. ‘Anyway,’ he continued, moving forward to where Granger waited on the edge of her chair. ‘May I sit?’

She inhaled sharply through her nose, caught off guard for one precious moment. Weasley laughed, dry and mocking. ‘I really hope you’re joking.’

Tom’s eye twitched. He was used to unpleasant things, though none of them felt half as degrading as this. Swallowing the bitter taste in his mouth, he said, ‘alright, we’ll stand then. If that makes you feel more at ease.’

Weasley scowled at him but said nothing. He was learning, Tom thought, albeit slowly.

‘What do you want then?’ Granger said. ‘Go on — spit it out.’

‘Did you ever consider the fact that I may just want to talk?’

‘*No.’*

‘That crap may work on Harry, but it won’t with us.’

‘Really, Riddle, stop playing games.’

Tom let the moment drag out until they were both staring at him, frustrated. He shifted on the spot. Grimaced.

‘While I acknowledge the fact that we … disagree on certain matters … I believe it would be best to put it aside. For Harry’s sake.’

‘What do you mean, for *Harry’s sake?’* Granger said, as though a stranger sentence had never come from Tom’s mouth. Maybe it hadn’t.

‘Really, Hermione? You don’t think the fact that he practically has to lead a double life affects him in any way? And then, of course, there’s

the matter of how you two make him feel so *guilty* and *horrible* all the time.'

Granger blanched, and Weasley's face darkened. Before they began a spiel— and really, Tom's head already hurt enough — he continued.

'I must say, I'm almost impressed. It's quite manipulative, isn't it?'

'Oh, you're one to talk,' Weasley snarled.

'How dare you —'

'We all want what's best for *Harry* here, right?' Tom smiled at the way they stiffened. 'Or do you disagree? He's not bothered by the … animosity?'

Granger chewed her lip. 'I mean,' she began, 'it is clearly affecting him. And I hate you, and I don't want to encourage any of this but … '

'But?' Tom prompted.

'Well, what are we agreeing to exactly? Turning a blind eye on every horrible thing you do in case it upsets *Harry?'*

*'*Of course not. Though if you're offering, I wouldn't refuse …'

'Riddle.'

'*Hermione,'* he echoed. 'I won't annoy you if you do the same. What do you say — a truce?'

'Really, Riddle,' Weasley said, narrowing his eyes. 'You want us to hide the fact we hate your fucking guts for *Harry's sake?* What exactly are you getting out of this?'

Tom shrugged. It eliminated the risk, he thought. The risk of *choice.*

'What can I say, I'm in a generous mood. And there's no reason we should run into each other that much anyway. I imagine you can control yourselves for those brief moments?'

'God, you're such a cunt — 'Weasley began.

Tom was enjoying this immensely. 'So,' he said. 'Shall I take that as a yes?'

'No,' Granger snapped before pausing. 'It's for Harry, not you. Only

because I can see the stress that he's under. But you — you deserve nothing. Do you know that? You don't deserve *him,* or our agreement, or anything nice in your life at all. If he wasn't my best friend —'

'You'd cast him aside?'

Granger didn't stiffen, though her eyes went wide. For a moment, he thought she would stand. She hovered on the edge of her seat and eventually relented.

'Like you have any clue about loyalty,' Weasley said. 'You can't *really* expect us to believe you care about Harry's well-being after everything you've done. And do you think your ridiculous relationship is going to last?'

Tom barely suppressed a sneer. The urge to retort hovered on the tip of his tongue, taking everything he had to tamp it down. How he loathed them. With their careless naivety, their unwavering ignorance, their endless presumptions —

'*Well,'* Tom said. 'Do you agree that we won't argue and reveal the depths of our feelings in front of Harry?'

Two dark, mistrustful expressions watched him.

'*Yes,'* Granger snapped. 'Though it means absolutely nothing in regards to how I feel about you. Nothing has changed between us.'

'Of course not,' Tom said mildly. *Like he would want* that.

'And he knows it. Harry knows we think you're a piece of crap …'

'Yes, well, it's mutual, I assure you.' Tom lifted a book from one of the shelves to read later. *Confronting the Faceless.* How delightful. 'Oh, and Weasley? Do try not to mention this conversation when Harry arrives. Unless, of course, you want it to work in my favour.'

Weasley scowled at him. Granger's eyebrows were set. Her fingers drummed restlessly on the desktop, her face conflicted.

'See you later, *friends,'* Tom said, with a final mocking smile.

Walking back through the shelves, his lips twisted upwards. Victory.

The Boggart

Chapter Notes

> A quick note that there's some descriptions of violence and gore in this chapter, in regard to the boggart.

Tom was the first person to know about the boggarts.

He was in Professor Slughorn's office, his face stiff from all the smiling and laughing he was forced to perform, brain sapped of anything resembling energy. Slughorn had been dancing around the subject all week and —after Tom had listened to a long, boring story about Quidditch—finally let slip what Professor Merrythought's surprise was going to be.

'Don't tell anyone, my boy,' he said, eyes twinkling. 'You know how it is with people landing themselves in the Hospital Wing with mysterious ailments. And she wants it to reflect real life as closely as possible— though horrible things, boggarts, as if anyone would forget them in a hurry… I don't know, I've never been able to stomach Defence myself … wouldn't want to be in your position …'

'I won't tell anyone, sir,' Tom said politely. The secret —shared and falsely intimate— hung between them.

Later that night in the common room, he told Harry.

'Oh,' Harry said and grimaced. 'My boggart is a dementor. Though I don't fear them all that much anymore.'

He gave the information easily. It wasn't something Tom could use against him, even if he wanted to.

'All those bad memories you have?'

Harry gave him a somewhat surprised look and nodded. 'Something like that,' he agreed.

They settled back into the armchairs, momentarily lost in their thoughts. Tom ran his fingers along the smooth leather, watching the flames flicker and dance. Harry's face was fading in and out of the firelight, unbothered, at ease.

Boggarts.

They were always unpleasant.

It had been four years since Tom had faced a boggart. Fourteen and standing in this same office, he had watched his body writhe and twist in a grotesque act of death. His wand hadn't wavered — though he had gripped it, vice-like, the incantation a mantra in his head: *Riddikulus, Riddikulus, Riddikulus.*

Now, there was no need to fear the impossible. Every twist of his ring was a reminder of his immortality. He walked into the office with ease, the door shutting behind him and blocking out the noises from the hall.

Tom greeted Professor Merrythought with a smile, his wand twirling idly between his fingers. He wouldn't stand there, stiff, stupid, the evidence of his ugly mortality gazing up at him. Now he knew what to expect.

Before he entered, Harry had flashed him a smile. They were to visit the office one by one, divided by house. While the other Slytherins had looked anxious, Harry didn't appear bothered. But then —like all things he did—Harry worked on instinct and impulsive, not careful thought and deduction.

He would have met his greatest fears head on.

The office was neat and tidy, all Professor Merrythought's belongings removed (when Tom had been here last, there was a picture of her plump, smiling wife on the desk, and several newspaper clippings showing Aurors pasted to the walls). Blinds were pulled over the window, casting shadows across the floor.

If this was his office, and not hers …

Tom pushed that thought aside.

'You know the incantation, I assume?'

A trunk in the centre of the room rattled. Tom raised an eyebrow, and Professor Merrythought gave a quick, jerky nod.

'Of course you do. Now, here we go.'

The trunk began to open slowly, every inch revealing a sliver of white light. When it was about halfway ajar, it flung back and smoke shot into the air, thick black tendrils, swirling and packing together.

Abruptly, the smoke parted, revealing a body on the floor.

Tom stared down at his own face and noted, distastefully, that it didn't look particularly at peace. Weren't the dead meant to look like they were sleeping?

His father had exhibited a sort of heightened fear in death, eyes comically wide. The Tom lying on the floor, however, didn't seem anything but *dead.*

'Riddikulus,' Tom said.

There was a loud, cracking noise and he was staring down at Voldemort's mutilated face.

Without being fully aware of it, Tom took a step backwards.

It looked like his face was made from clay. Squashed and misshaped, hacked at in parts, bulbous in others. It was a horrible interpretation of what a human should look like, with its glassy scarlet eyes, its thin, snakelike lips, the papery distorted features. The nose had been chipped off, leaving a hollow. Skin glued to the skull, waxy and tight so that every dip and bone was grotesquely prominent. And that face, stretched and thin, beginning to tear …

It wasn't the ugliness that disturbed him most. Voldemort looked weak. Fragile. *Pathetic.*

And then the hole, which was a mouth, opened and a thin, raspy voice said, 'you searched and searched but we were never meant to achieve greatness, Tom. Death got even me in the end, despite how much I fought.'

From the corner of his eye, Tom caught a gleam of gold. The Peverell ring lay an inch away from Voldemort, emitting a steady stream of putrid green acid. Tom reached for his own ring, but his finger was empty. Where was it?

'You can't escape death, Tom. We can never truly win.'

'Riddikulus,' Tom said.

But the scene wasn't finished and Voldemort opened his rotten, toothless mouth and laughed. 'We're not indestructible,' he rasped. 'You think those little things make a difference? We're *nothing*.'

In Voldemort's spindly, limp fingers was the Elder Wand — Tom knew it was, he had stared at it for so long in Transfiguration that the image was burned into his mind.

There was a snap and the wood splintered down the middle. Tom took a step backwards and hit off something cold and hard — stone walls, scratched with names and pieces of chalk. A childish squiggle of a rabbit. The indent of a hand.

What good is a name, a voice whispered, *if you can't truly get rid of what's inside?*

Tom turned away from the walls of the orphanage. Voldemort was standing before him, his expression frozen as he stared behind Tom's head. They were the same height, though Voldemort had lost all his hair and his scalp was gleaming white and patterned with scales.

Tom didn't make the mistake of turning around, despite how tempted he felt.

He lifted his wand and at the same moment a cracking noise echoed through the room. And quite suddenly, as though it was where he was always meant to stand, Harry had taken Voldemort's spot.

Tom was too surprised to do anything. The incantation was half-formed on his lips, but he paused, uncertain yet intrigued.

Harry's clothes were in tatters and his hair was in its usual state of disarray. His fringe was brushed from his eyes and the imprint of his scar burned red, slick and glossy with blood. It smeared his face, stained his clothes, and caked his hands. He held a basilisk fang loosely, the tip of it coated in dark liquid.

'You were looking forward to this, weren't you?' Harry said. His voice didn't waver but he spoke without emotion. 'Defeating me. The next best thing, right, Riddle? I mean, when we're done *fucking* and all that. You know I'm too much of a threat to keep around forever.'

He smiled, a sharp, knowing smile, both familiar and foreign. He wasn't *Harry* — not Tom's Harry — yet the similarities were there, disturbing and intriguing. He looked older — his face more angular, his cheeks dark with stubble. His hair was limp and sticky with blood

and his eyes were dull.

Tom licked his dry lips, knowing he couldn't end this now.

'Do you really think you'll ever be content, Riddle? Moving from one thing to the next? Chasing after whatever blocks out your dissatisfaction, however momentary it may be? What then, when you have it all? It will never last. Blame whatever you want but we both know that the real problem has always been *you*.'

Harry raised his head. His eyes weren't hard, or fierce, or blazing. Nor were they cold and determined, fearful or pleading. They weren't desperate. *Broken.* Instead, they were flat and as emotionless as his voice.

'You can't ruin me,' Harry said. 'Even he couldn't, and you? You're nothing compared to him.'

Tom's fingers tightened on his wand. His lips parted a fraction, silent syllables half-forming in his head.

Harry's hands rose to his mouth and he keeled over, gagging. There was a thin trail of liquid coming from his lips, black in the light. And then — as he gave a hacking cough — the stream of blood spilt forward, forming a crimson puddle on the floor between them.

Harry convulsed, his body spasming. He choked, he rasped, and it all came forward in a thick stream — insides, entrails, thick, gloopy chunks of muscle and stomach lining.

Tom was frozen. What was he meant to do? It wasn't distaste that made his insides freeze; wasn't revulsion that made him back away.

Harry continued to heave until his eyes rolled back in his head. Then, staggering on his feet, he vomited something solid — a long, ropey trail of intestines, slimy and wet. With it came the other entrails — lung, liver, and blood, so much *blood* — and a great, glossy heart.

Harry made a final noise, a wet, half-gasp, and collapsed headfirst into the pile of organs.

Tom took a step away from the mess, nostrils flaring. He could smell it — strong and metallic and rotting. Memories were stirring: a muggle child crying, a dirty porcelain sink, and a feverish face, the air thick with disease.

Harry's face was in the puddle of blood and Tom stared at the back of his dark head, slick and matted —

And down to the heart lying on the dirty floor, pulsing weakly. Like a jellyfish that had been washed ashore, it contracted — in, out, in, out —

Tom recoiled.

Voldemort was nothing. Voldemort was dead. Tom was never going to be enough, no matter how much he needed it.

And Harry lay dead at his feet, finally submissive, finally defeated, one grimy hand stretched out for a wand it would never find.

Harry was dead and it wasn't worth it. Tom was helpless — again. Always, always —

Tom snapped to the present.

Harry's death, he thought distantly. Was *that* meant to work on him?

'Riddikulus,' he finally said.

Tom hadn't thought of anything funny but as the words left his mouth, laughter started up, high and rattling. Harry disappeared and the boggart made a fizzing noise like a firework, a dark shape spiralled through the air —

With a definite slam, the trunk closed and the laughter stopped.

Tom stood there for a moment, disoriented. The floor was wooden and devoid of any stains. Everything spun. The copper scent of blood clogged his nose, and he could still hear the voice — just distinguishable as his own. A whisper. A promise.

It was then that Tom remembered Professor Merrythought.

He turned around and found her staring at him, all eyes. Her face was white, her lips in a trembling line. And he saw something curious there — something hesitant and uncertain and concerned.

Rage flared inside him, washing out the numbness.

How dare she see what was his. Witness what was unspeakable. How dare she.

‘You can call in the next student, Tom,’ she said, clearing her throat. ‘You did a good job.’

Tom was paralysed. A twitch of his wand and her old body would fall to the floor. She would have a reason to be curious then, oh yes. Voldemort’s secrets would follow her to the grave.

‘Thank you, professor,’ Tom said, meeting her brown eyes.

Obliviate, he thought, pushing past the resistance in her mind, letting his magic flood it. *It was the same as third-year. My dead body, nothing more. That’s what you saw.*

She blinked at him, her eyes unfocused. ‘Bring in the next one, won’t you, dear?’

Tom pulled open the door and light flooded through. A dozen curious faces gazed in at them, all unaware of what had happened.

‘Of course I will,’ Tom said and stiffly —forcing himself not to speed up or bolt—Tom walked out.

Dinner was a tense affair that night. Professor Merrythought — when the last of the students were finished with the boggart — said that her door was open for a chat if anyone needed it. Her eyes lingered on Mildred Crabbe, who was greenish and barely suppressing tears. Nevertheless, the table was quiet, no one wanting to be the one who took her up on the offer.

A weak attempt at conversation had started up between the girls and they talked about what they had seen in hushed whispers. Abraxas was pushing his food around his plate, eyes unfocused.

And Harry …

No, Tom didn’t want to think about Harry now.

They were nasty things, boggarts. They burrowed into your subconscious, deeper that legilimency could go, projecting thoughts even you were unaware of. Normally, Tom’s Occlumency was impeccable. And yet he had wanted to see … to know …

Halfway through the meal, Slughorn made his way down to the Slytherin Table. ‘A little get-together,’ he said, ‘to brighten your spirits — if any of you are feeling up to it, of course.’

Tom was in no mood to humour him. He avoided Slughorn’s gaze, eating in slow, robotic bites. Harry, who sat across from Tom, smiled politely. His face was slightly tight, his eyes a little more troubled than they had been earlier.

He hadn’t seen a boggart, Tom thought, despite how nonchalant he tried to appear.

Was it him? Voldemort?

A small part of Tom hoped so.

‘I think I’m going to have an early night.’ Abraxas stood up and placed his knife and fork neatly on his plate.

‘But it’s … seven,’ Harry said, ‘are you okay?’

‘Fine. I’m just going to — ‘he gestured uselessly— ‘write to my father.’

Harry didn’t press. He turned around and met Tom’s eyes, as if out of instinct. The look made Tom jolt.

Dead, he thought, all entrails and blood and eyes that were white. A heart still twitching on the ground. Why did it have to bother him so much? Harry was nothing except a little pale. He didn’t look at Tom with the dull vacancy of the boggart. His eyes were bright, expressive, concerned.

‘Why are you staring at me like that?’

‘Like what*?’*

‘Weirdly.’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ Tom said. And then, unable to resist, ‘how was your boggart?’

Harry frowned. ‘It was … unsettling, more than anything else. I don’t know. How was yours?’

‘Very much dead.’

Harry smiled appreciatively and Tom felt cold. He was overcome with the desire to disappear into the Chamber of Secrets and stay there a very long time. But even that bore the reminder of Harry now. It was tainted, like all the things that were his. No longer precious or unique, and he didn't know how that could be so, how Harry had wormed his way into Tom's life. Twisted and morphed and *ruined* it.

'I hated Professor Merrythought being there,' Harry said. 'It's too personal.'

Tom shook away the thought.

'Do you know in third-year we had to defeat a boggart in front of the entire class?'

Tom blinked at him. '*Really?'* he said, intrigued despite himself. 'How did that work out for you?'

Harry took a mouthful of pumpkin juice, beginning to grin. 'It could have been worse,' he said, launching into the story. 'And it bothered me for the entirety of the year.'

Grateful for the distraction, Tom leaned back to listen. Slowly, traitorously, the knot in his chest began to ease.

Harry sat in Dumbledore's office, his chest tight. Hailstones were pounding relentlessly against the windowpane, and Harry's eyes wandered to the marshy grass and overcast sky.

'I suppose it all depends on the nature of the time-travel,' he said slowly. 'If it's the same as a standard time-turner, then every little change that happened here has made the future impossible. If it's something else — an alternate time-line or something that doesn't affect how things are — then there's a chance we could get back.'

A fire was blazing merrily in Dumbledore's hearth. He had new pictures on his walls — Nicholas Flamel, beaming, a portly man Harry didn't recognise, and a woman with thick glasses and a dazzling smile.

'But the Time-Turner's broken. The magic that fuelled our journey

burned out. And there's never been anything to suggest that two different time-lines can exist anyway, nevermind travelling between them. Not fifty years in the future, and not now.'

A particularly violent hailstone bounced against the windowpane, causing both Harry and Dumbledore to start.

Harry stared at his hands: *I must not tell lies*, white and faded. A callous from his broomstick, a scar from where Aunt Marge's dog had bitten him when he was seven. The remnants of a past life.

'Time-travel of this nature isn't something I've heard of before,' Dumbledore mused. His auburn beard was reflecting the lights of the fire, and his glasses slipped down his crooked nose. 'Nor have any of my friends in the ministry, or indeed, anyone I've heard of.'

'You mean the Department of Mysteries?' Harry said, the words not quite the sinking thing they had once been. Somehow, he was starting to come to terms with the fact that they were here, and the future no longer had such a hold on him.

'Your Time-Turner was found in the vault of one of Voldemort's followers, correct?'

'Yeah, but he doesn't know …'

Harry stopped because Tom was not a topic he discussed with Dumbledore.

'A pity,' Dumbledore said, tactfully ignoring how Harry had faltered. 'And a most curious thing. Perhaps we'll never know. The actions that resulted in that time-turner could be impossible to replicate. And considering Mr Riddle's knowledge …'

'It's useless,' Harry agreed. 'With everything that's happened.'

They were silent for a moment. Professor Dumbledore had a tin of gingerbread biscuits sitting on his desk, wrapped in a red satin bow. A painted reindeer trotted across the metal lid, disappearing into a misty forest and leaving a trail of hoof prints. He offered one to Harry, who —with a desire to do something with his hands—accepted.

'Have you given much thought to your future here?' Dumbledore said, 'and what path you wish to pursue?'

Harry swallowed with difficulty. It was an inevitable reminder of the

futility of his relationship with Tom. A reminder that was starting to feel more and more pressing. *And the boggart …*

He shut that thought firmly away.

‘I’m not sure yet, sir,’ Harry said, ‘I have a lot more choice than I did in our time. It’s ...freeing.’

‘A very smart attitude,’ Dumbledore agreed. ‘Indeed, for all of us. We can guess, gauge, and imagine as far into the future as we desire, though the obscurity of it remains.’ He sighed, almost wistfully, following Harry’s eyes towards the window.

It had stopped hail stoning, and the grounds experienced a rare moment of stillness. A breeze stirred the glistening lawns, which were heavy with rainfall. Dumbledore spoke, his voice distant, his eyes fixed on the stretch of periwinkle sky. ‘What, indeed, comes next?’

Ever since the boggart, Tom had been distant. He was always prone to bouts of restlessness and detachment, particularly when things were too comfortable. This time, however, Tom was merely *odd.*

Thoughtful, silent, he hummed distractedly when Harry talked. His leg twitched which he didn’t seem aware of. He was compulsively twisting his ring around his finger, enough that Harry began to wonder if it would break. And still — *still* — he maintained a tone of utter lightness.

Now, Harry watched him from the corner of his eye. Tom had raked his hands through his hair and it was hanging in his face. He leafed through a textbook, eyes staring blankly at the page.

‘Hey, Tom,’ Harry said, mindful of the students around them. The common room was full, the seventh years taking solace in the roaring fireplaces and company, and the younger students playing chess and exploding snap while chatting about their Christmas plans.

Tom glanced up. ‘Yes?’ he said, somewhat shortly. He cleared his throat and said it again.

Harry suppressed a smile. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Am I … ‘Tom frowned at him, as though he found the question absurd. ‘Yes. *Why*?’

Harry shrugged. ‘No reason. You look a bit restless. You’re not thinking about making another horcrux, are you? Because you already have two, and despite the boggart, you’re not going to die.’

Tom blinked as though that hadn’t occurred to him. ‘Sure of that, are you?’

‘Yes,’ Harry said, ‘unless you put your life at risk, or you know, decide to *take over the Wizarding World* — ‘he shook his head, not wanting to start an argument. ‘I’m only saying, you’ve conquered death already.’

Tom looked at him for a moment, and then said mildly, ‘I know.’

‘I died before,’ Harry felt the need to say. ‘Or somewhat. When I was hit with a Killing Curse.’

Tom’s eyes flickered to his scar. ‘That’s different.’

‘Is it?’

‘You came back. You don’t remember it. Or you didn’t even die, and the curse rebounded ….’ his fingers fidgeted. ‘Does it not bother you at all? Dying?’

Harry paused and then said bluntly, ‘I always thought I was going to die anyway. Obviously, I didn’t want it, but I accepted it when I was still a kid …’

‘And you still do?’ Tom frowned. He was pallid in the greenish light, and his eyes were intense. ‘You’d still just *die?’*

‘I wouldn’t just *die,’* Harry said, rather baffled. ‘I don’t want to die, but I’m not scared of it either. I know it’s going to happen, it’s a fact of life —'

Tom stared at him for a long moment and abruptly his face changed. ‘For you, it is,’ he said, with a rather forced attempt at a smile. ‘Some of us have other means of staying alive.’

Harry said nothing. Tom seemed ready to bolt or close off. Blank-faced, he stared into the fireplace and Harry, feeling his heart jump in his throat, said, ‘do you want to do something? That … *thing* with the wands, or …'

Tom blinked at him. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah,’ Harry said. ‘I feel like firing a few curses today, after Defence.’

‘Alright,’ Tom said, and his eagerness made Harry smile. Standing up, Tom absently ran a hand through his hair, tidying it. Harry, who was slowly gathering his books, was struck by the inexplicable, impossible urge to hug him.

‘Empty classroom?’ Harry suggested, and then, unsure if Tom would agree, ‘Chamber?’

Tom gave him another look — a lot less scrutinising, but nevertheless wary. ‘Okay. Though it’s still *my* chamber. You can’t go in it whenever you fancy. I know you speak Parseltongue — ‘

Harry snorted. ‘Yeah, you’re really overestimating my love of human remains and fifty-foot snakes.’

Tom’s lips quirked. ‘Oh, shut up.’

A fire crackled in the Room of Requirement. Harry, Ron and Hermione sat in plush armchairs, discussing Harry’s earlier conversation with Dumbledore. Ron’s attitude had taken a bitter turn, and he brushed off all their tentative plans with dark humour and changes of topic. Harry couldn’t blame him. The Weasleys were still a painful reminder, and every thought of them was like twisting a knife in an open wound. No wonder Ron had started resenting Dumbledore and his inability to help. Even Harry couldn’t help but feel frustrated when he remembered the futility of their attempts to get back and all the hours they had pored over books.

‘He offered us a place to stay after Hogwarts,’ Harry said, watching Ron. ‘Apparently, he has a flat in Hogsmeade that he used when he was studying under Nicolas Flamel. Though I didn’t accept it.’

‘Nice of him,’ Hermione said mildly.

‘Clearly an attempt at feeling good about himself,’ Ron scoffed, ‘what about all the other students who struggle financially? Just leave them to rot?’

‘Well, there’s school funds,’ Hermione began, ‘and of course, it’s rare that students would have *nowhere* to go. There’s usually a relative or a friend … ‘

Harry’s thoughts went to Tom and by the way that Hermione paused, he imagined hers were similar.

‘How was the boggart?’ she said abruptly. ‘I completely forgot. Ours isn’t until next Wednesday, because there was some trouble with the Ravenclaws …’

‘Stupid thing to do in seventh-year, boggarts,’ Ron said, ‘considering they only appear on the written portion of the exam.’

‘Well, you know Professor Merrythought,’ Hermione said, ‘she’s very practical.’

Harry sunk deeper into the armchair. The boggart had crept its way into his dreams the past few nights, taunting and cryptic, just out of reach …

‘It was odd,’ Harry said, chewing his lip. The memory stirred in his head, faint, almost detached. ‘It wasn’t really scary, but I can’t stop thinking about it. I suppose that’s what they do - get to you.’

‘Boggarts have a much stronger impact on adults,’ Hermione said. ‘Their greatest fears are often not physical things, nor can they be confined to a sole entity. That’s why they’re more sinister, picking at your subconscious and the half-formed thoughts in your head.’

Harry thought of Tom and the pensive expression on his face these past few days. The restlessness that lingered and the silence between them that said so much. He didn’t want to press Tom —not when his behaviour could be so erratic.

And Harry’s mind stirred — Merrythought’s classroom, the way the lid of the trunk had creaked open, a flash of wings and gold.

‘I suppose it was probably nothing,’ Harry began, meeting not Hermione’s eyes but Ron’s. He ran a hand across his face, trying to dispel the fog that had suddenly muddled his thoughts. ‘But it left me with the *weirdest* feeling …’

Escaping the heat of the common room, Tom made his way out of the castle. Dusk fell early in December and the grounds were dark with shadows. He crossed the lawns, strode down the leaf-strewn pathways, the wind snatching at his arms. The biting air was a relief after the stifling common room, where the quiet, suffocating heat seemed to ooze into his mind and stir all his restless thoughts. To sit there, surrounded by the others —just when had he started to hate them? — itchy and on edge.

The coldness flooded his senses now, bringing clarity. Perhaps he'd go into the Forest.

It was a rippling shape, where the darkness of the sky seemed to gravitate. The bare trees swayed in the wind, occasionally creaking and emitting mournful sighs. Tom could feel the magic of the forest like a rush. It was a whisper of promise, a sweet, dark reassurance of everything he needed. Tom wanted to immerse himself in it; allow it to envelop him.

He reached the bottom of the hill and glanced around. Rubeus' hut glowed orange in the half-light, and smoke rose steadily from the chimney. Tom glanced at the twisting mass of trees, as alive as any other aspect of Hogwarts, and paused.

The sun was sinking over the Lake, smearing the sky scarlet. The Slytherin Quidditch Team were tiny pinpricks, weaving and darting through the air.

Tom put his hands in his pockets, leaning on one foot.

Despite the rickety broomstick he used, Harry's movements were fluid. Tom could pick him out easily —higher than the other players, carelessly natural in flight. Something disgustingly tight settled in Tom's chest, and he knew, despite how much he immersed himself in the Forest, despite how much magic he practised until he was exhausted, it would nag at him, like an infected wound. It had followed him these past few days —the knowing words of the boggart, the thin paper-like skin of Voldemort with his unsmiling lips. Harry, dead, the image as distorted and wrong as Tom's own mutilated face.

Harry was his horcrux. It was only natural that Tom wouldn't want to give him up. Didn't he feel the same fear for the others? The revulsion at the thought of them separating?

It really was freezing.

Tom tore his eyes away from the Quidditch Pitch and back towards the Forbidden Forest. Without removing his hands from his pockets, he illuminated his wand and strode through the undergrowth. Twigs crunched underfoot. Tom felt the promise of magic —dark, exhilarating, *enough* —and made his way through the trees.

Tom only remembered Rubeus' stupid spider when he was so deep in the forest that the canopy swallowed the sky. Reluctantly, for despite the danger it posed, he had found a handful of hemlock, half a dozen rare toadstools, and an iridescent unicorn hair on the bark of an oak tree, Tom turned.

Something stirred in the trees ahead and Tom relished the fact that it couldn't touch him. The creatures of the forest hadn't graced his path, yet Tom felt their presence, curious and fearful.

When he reached the fringes of the forest, the sky above was dark. Tom —unwilling to go back to the Common Room — decided he would do rounds early, and perhaps some research in the library. He made his way up the hill, his mind clear and focused. Voldemort was what he wanted. What he had always wanted. And while his path was now more warped than it had been before, it was still there. Harry was only a distraction. A temporary hurdle. He was —

Standing at the top of the hill.

Tom didn't slow down or allow his surprise to show. 'Harry,' he said when he had reached him. 'Fancy seeing you here.'

They looked at each other for a moment.

'Quidditch,' Harry said. 'It ran late, and I was helping Alphard tidy up. What are *you* doing outside?'

'I was in the Forest.'

He couldn't see Harry's face, not in the dark, but the lightness of his voice was unnerving.

'Yeah, I thought I saw someone, so I told Alphard to go on. Do I even

want to know why you're wandering around the Forest in the dark?'

'I fancied a walk.'

Harry paused, perhaps at the stiffness in Tom's voice, which he hadn't bothered to mask. Who did Harry think he was, his *mother?*

The clarity from the forest had snuffed out. They stood there, in the half-light of the evening, everything obscured.

Tom raised his wand slightly and Harry's face came into focus. His hair was wet and plastered to his forehead, the ends starting to curl. The tip of his nose was red and his eyes were very bright. Tom's insides lurched with such a mishmash of emotions that he lowered the light at once.

'I'm going to do rounds,' he said. 'I'll see you later.'

He moved to walk past yet Harry only cocked his head. 'You don't do rounds on a Tuesday. And curfew hasn't even started yet.'

'Is that so?' Tom raised his eyebrows. 'Maybe I'll go and arrange a meeting with the prefects then.'

Harry stiffened. For a second, Tom wanted to take back the coldness, but his heart was thumping too violently. And since when did he *care* if Harry flinched? Hadn't that once brought him relish?

'You know, Tom, for someone who's so obsessed with death, you sure spend a lot of time putting your life in danger. Or does wandering around the forest, hoping you don't run into a dozen acromantulas, make you feel powerful?'

It was Tom's turn to stiffen. 'Are you worried?' he mocked. 'Or do you just feel the urge to needlessly insert yourself into every aspect of my life?'

'Oh, that's rich coming from you — '

And they were shouting at each other, the words snatched by the wind. The frustration that had been building inside Tom was rising, unable to be contained. How dare Harry probe into his life? Why was he so nosy? So determined to pry and dissect?

'—you're obsessive!'

'*I'm* the obsession one?'

Tom couldn't feel the cold anymore. His body was flooded with something hot, something poisonous, and his ears were thumping.

'—I wasn't aware everything I did had to involve you.'

'Oh, please. Strut around the stupid forest all you want, if you think it's going to help. You're so consumed by the idea of dying — so *obsessed* with it— that it controls everything you do.'

'Is that right? If I wanted a spiel I would have gone to Dumbledore. Been talking to him recently?'

'Oh, piss off,' Harry snapped. 'You have your bloody horcruxes. Why isn't that enough?'

'Horcruxes that you know of. You, Dumbledore and probably half of Gryffindor house. Don't you plan on *destroying* them?'

'So hide them better. Or — consider this — don't be so despicable that everyone wants you dead.'

'Since when are you so concerned with what I think about death?'

'Because I'm worried about you, you git!'

Harry froze as the words left his mouth, his eyes going wide. Tom's heart jumped in his chest. Whatever he was going to say next had vanished.

'You're worried about me?' he repeated, in a strange voice that didn't sound like him at all.

Harry shifted from foot to foot. The outline of his breath hung silver in the air. Tom wished more than anything to see Harry's expression.

'Obviously. You're quiet and odd and… unsettled. And we're not going to talk about the boggart — even though you clearly saw your death. I don't want you to do anything rash, in an attempt to combat it. And you're traipsing around the forest in the dark— '

'You're worried about me,' Tom repeated, equal parts indignant and bemused. And something else, something he didn't want to examine too closely.

They were both breathing heavily. Overhead, the sky was black, and through the small windows of the castle came the yellowish glow of candlelight. Harry put his hands in his pockets, glancing away.

‘It’s snowing,’ Tom said suddenly. He raised his wand, illuminating the air around them. Flakes were falling softly, glittering and white, making their way to the wet ground where they dissolved.

‘Oh,’ Harry said and put out his hand to feel the flakes land on it. The crystals were settling in his dark hair and the shoulders of his robes. Tom watched, snow swirling gently around them, and was silent.

‘I’m sorry for being nosy,’ Harry said at last.

‘It’s alright.’

‘It’s just … in the future, you were so obsessed with not dying that you drank unicorn blood. You sustained yourself on the life-force of snakes, and other people. You created more and more horcruxes, always searching for new ways to become immortal.’

‘Unicorn blood?’ Tom said. ‘I suppose I already led a cursed life at that point.’

Harry smiled weakly. ‘But anyway, despite it all, you *didn’t* die. Even with a killing curse that rebounded. The horcruxes worked. They’re always going to work, Tom. And sure, I know what they are, but why does it have to come to that?’

Tom didn’t say anything. Something lodged in his chest, wrenching sharply every time he looked at the expression on Harry’s face. How much he longed for it to all be so easy … how much he wanted …

‘I’m not going to make seven horcruxes again. Or drink unicorn blood, which seems like a new level of desperation. Even for me.’

‘You’re not?’

The wind snatched the words. Stirred Tom’s hair.

‘No,’ he said, clearing his throat. ‘We should go inside.’

‘Yeah.’

But Harry didn’t move. Snowflakes were dissolving in his hair and he smiled. ‘Prefect’s bathroom?’

‘You’re not even a Prefect.’

‘I was Quidditch Captain once, that has to count.’

‘You should take that one up with Headmaster Dippet. Maybe he’ll promote you.’

‘Oh, come on, it’s *freezing*. I can’t feel my legs.’

Tom shook his head in amusement. They made their way to the castle, the silence more settled now. And if they walked a little closer than necessary, then that could only be blamed on the cold. The feeling of Harry’s arm brushing against Tom’s own was strangely reassuring, and fighting against his instincts, Tom didn’t draw back.

Pulling down the handle of the oak front doors, he was greeted with a flood of warmth and the sound of chatter drifting from the Hall. He glanced at Harry, whose glasses had fogged up.

Tom couldn’t say it, not the real reason for his restlessness. It was too wrong, too inexplicable, too forbidden for even his thoughts. The admittance felt like swallowing poison.

He looked at Harry, whose cheeks were flushed from the cold, and swallowed.

I don’t want you to die.

Tear Down The Walls

Chapter Notes

> Minor warning for some underage drinking and sexual content while under the influence of alcohol.

It snowed heavily throughout the night. When Harry ventured to the Great Hall for breakfast, it was to see the grounds cast in a foot-high mound of snow. Students were already flocking to see this oddity: a charmed snowman stood at the top of the hill, stick arms waving like windmills; shrieks of laughter echoed through the windows and snowballs hit the glass with dull thuds, followed by whoops and roars of delight.

Harry and Abraxas talked enthusiastically about Quidditch plans while eating buttered crumpets. Christmas trees had sprung up in the hall, stout, dark, and smelling of sap. Sipping a mug of coffee, Tom talked with Lucretia, his long fingers wrapped around the mug. The reminder of the boggart lingered in his features — paler than usual, eyes framed by dark rings. Harry's mind wandered back to the night before. He knew Tom hadn't slept because he had heard him disappear from the dorm in the middle of the night. Disappear for so long that Harry fell asleep, uneasy, expectant, wondering if the whole thing had been a dream.

The day passed in a blur of classes, fuzzy and tinged by the prospect of the Christmas holidays that started on Friday. In Transfiguration, while copying down notes from the board, Dumbledore remarked upon the upcoming new year and the looming prospect of their NEWTs. Harry, the words alighting something in his head, turned to his right and said to Tom, 'isn't your birthday the thirty-first?'

Tom paused in his note writing. 'How do you even *know* that?'

'I know lots of things about your life. You should accept it by now.'

Tom smirked. 'Still, that's awfully specific. I don't even know when your birthday is.'

'Oh, it's — 'Harry paused, a jolt of energy coursing through him. 'I missed it.'

'You missed your own birthday?'

The classroom was loud with chatter. Dumbledore, sitting behind his desk, made no means to subdue it.

Harry chewed his lip. ‘It was May when we arrived here and my birthday’s at the end of July. So really — ‘he thought back for a moment— ‘it was actually a couple of weeks ago, considering how much time has passed.’

Another realisation and Harry grinned. ‘I’m eighteen. I’m *older* than you.’

‘By what, a whole month?’

Harry squinted at the board, trying to make out Dumbledore’s long, loopy handwriting. ‘Doesn't that annoy you even *slightly?’*

Tom only made an unimpressed noise in his throat. Harry, trying to process the crazy revelation that he should - technically - celebrate his birthday on the thirtieth of November from now on, was equal parts amused and sad. He would still celebrate it in July: that small tradition was the only thing he could hold onto from the past.

Out the window, the snow glistened. The sun was fighting its way through the clouds in small shards, gleaming down on the brilliant white expense. A little distance from Hogwarts castle, slowly and definitely, the frozen surface of the Lake began to crack.

Harry and Ron played Quidditch above the slushy grass, their hands red and stiff around the school broomsticks. It felt freeing being in the air. Several times, Harry caught himself grinning without being quite sure why. They had talked for a long time about their time here at Hogwarts and the tentative prospects of the future (Hermione had brought up the topic of Christmas presents and the impending Hogwarts trip; Ron had reminded her of their poverty). In the kitchens — drinking steaming mugs of hot chocolate— Harry looked at his two friends. He’d find a way to get them a decent present, he thought, after everything they had been through. Something without any reminders. Something new.

When he eventually went back to the common room and flung himself on one of the nearest armchairs, Harry was too tired to reflect deeply

on the conversation or the memories they had stirred. He closed his eyes against the flickering firelight, listening to the murmur of conversation and the scratch of quills.

Tom's aloofness had thawed. Harry imagined it had something to do with the hours he had spent with Ron and Hermione, though Tom would vehemently deny his jealousy. Perhaps it was their conversation from the night before.

Opening his eyes, Harry stared over at him. Tom was talking to Walburga Black and her group of friends. They were gazing at Tom in open admiration, though sitting a little distance from him, divided even now. Walburga let out a loud, bright laugh, tossing her glossy black curls over her shoulder. Harry wondered what was so funny.

'You up for a game of chess, Harry?'

Harry tore his eyes away from Tom and towards Abraxas, who sat on his right. 'What was that?'

Abraxas —who was sharing a sofa with Belinda—followed Harry's gaze and grinned. 'Distracted?'

'No.' Harry cleared his throat, blinking away the fog from his mind. 'I'm just tired.'

'Do you reckon she fancies him?'

That was Belinda.

Harry turned to her, no longer surprised by her bluntness. 'Walburga?' He gave them a sideways glance. 'It doesn't bother me.'

Except his insides twisted, hot at the implication. Walburga's head was tossed back, exposing the long, slender line of her throat. Nott and Mulciber were watching Tom attentively, their faces positively aglow.

'Does it not?' She smirked. 'I bet you could convince him to come over here. Do something —make eye-contact.'

Harry laughed at the suggestion. 'He's only mad that I was hanging around with Ron and Hermione. And anyway, Tom wouldn't move if I made *eye-contact* — '

She snorted. 'Whatever you say, Harry.'

Harry's face heated against his will. The common room was warm and Belinda and Abraxas were watching him in amusement. Harry thought of Ron and Hermione from earlier; Tom, and the dizzy rush of feelings that came with him. He grinned, tired and warm and utterly content.

'Hey, Abraxas,' he said, turning to his friend, 'did you say something about chess?'

When classes ended on Friday, the number of students in the castle dropped significantly. The Slytherin common room was quieter and among the seventh years, Harry, Tom, Rosier, Abraxas, Belinda and Lucretia were the only ones staying behind. Harry —who knew Christmas would be hitting Ron the hardest—tried to keep his Gryffindor friends distracted as best as he could. Ron and Hermione had faced the boggart on Wednesday and the mood between them was subdued. The only good thing about it was the fact that they had each other.

Harry's own boggart still lingered in his mind, coming in moments of quiet. It flashed through his thoughts, elusive, fleeting, and leaving behind a feeling of unease. Harry couldn't probe it too closely without the images distorting. He couldn't quite put his finger on why it bothered him … why it stirred something in his memory, foggy and out of reach, like a forgotten dream.

On Saturday night, the common room was quiet. Professor Slughorn had hosted a party for the remaining younger students, who —Harry heard from Tom—were complaining about being left out. It was odd to enter the common room and know there were only a smattering of students left. Abraxas had decided they were having a party of their own.

'A party?' Harry repeated, bemused.

Abraxas nodded adamantly. 'It's Belinda's last week before she goes home for Christmas! And anyway, Lucretia has, like, five bottles of firewhiskey in her trunk — '

Harry decided now was not the time to question this. The Slytherin definition of a 'party' was a lot looser than the Gryffindor one. Harry, used to the shenanigans of the Weasley twins, had been expecting

more than some food from the kitchens. Nevertheless, Abraxas was positively beaming at the fact that he had managed to steal it.

'Right, steal,' Harry said, eyes sweeping across the plates. 'Did you have to cover the house-elves eyes while they gave it to you?'

'Oh, shut up, Harry.'

They had the common room to themselves. Lucretia was sitting in one of the armchairs near the fire with Belinda, and Tom —astonishingly —was with them.

'Some party, right?' Harry said to him wryly.

Tom arched an eyebrow. 'What do you have to compare it to? Weren't you *home-schooled?'*

They shared a grin. Abraxas ushered Harry into one of the armchairs, who rolled his eyes and complied. He couldn't resist the desire to look at Tom. The fact that he wasn't in the chamber, the library, or a secluded part of the castle, was surprising. But then again, sometimes Tom surprised him.

Abraxas' eyes flickered to Tom. 'Hey, Lucretia,' he said, clearing his throat, 'didn't you say you had firewhiskey?'

'Yeah.' She lifted her satchel from the ground and pulled back the clasp. Amber bottles glinted and knocked together as she pulled them out. 'Better hope Slughorn doesn't decide to come and check in on us. Oh, well.'

Harry wasn't sure what made him look at Belinda. It was an instinct more than anything else, as his thoughts went back to his very first Slug Club meeting. She gave him a tight smile and accepted Lucretia's glass gratefully, taking an enormous mouthful and wincing at the burn.

'Harry?'

Harry looked around. Abraxas was grinning, light in a way that had evaded him since the boggart. Beside him, Belinda watched Harry, her glass poised at her lips. Lounged back in his seat, Tom's mouth was twisted in faint amusement. He caught Harry's eye and flashed him a smile.

'Alright,' Harry said, turning back to Lucretia's warm brown eyes.

‘Cheers.’

The firewhiskey flooded his body with warmth. Harry looked at them —wondering briefly where Rosier had gotten to—and realised that, for the first time, he felt like a member of Slytherin House. The realisation warmed his insides in much the same way the alcohol did. Harry gave Belinda a quick smile, who instantly relaxed. So much had changed, he thought, but not all of it was bad.

‘So,’ Abraxas said, clearing his throat, ‘anyone know when the next Hogsmeade trip is?’

‘I won’t be going,’ Belinda said, ‘though I’ll owl you your Christmas present.’

‘Can’t you apparate over?’ Lucretia asked.

‘No, I—'a funny expression crossed her face and she took another swig from her firewhiskey— ‘I have plans.’

There was silence for a second. Abraxas blinked at her, leaning forward and faltering. Lucretia chewed her lip between her teeth, clearing her throat. Harry paused.

‘It’s the eighteenth,’ Tom said.

‘The —oh! The Hogsmeade trip.’ Abraxas gave Tom a grateful look and at once the tension dispelled. ‘How do you know that?’

Tom shrugged. ‘We were discussing it during the last prefects’ meeting. Unless you want me to suggest we have it earlier?’

‘No, the eighteenth’s good,’ Lucretia said, ‘I might meet with — ‘she faltered. ‘Walburga.’

Her eyes flickered to Tom but he didn’t say anything. And just like that, Lucretia relaxed too.

Harry felt a soft, probing curiosity at the exchange. It was rare to see Tom interact with the others in such an amicable manner. Yet surely it must happen —such loyalty, such respect, couldn’t be garnered only from *fear.* They had so much history. History that Harry would never be able to fully grasp. Did they know that Tom only tolerated them? Or —underneath the fear, the caution —did they still have that faint hope that he felt something more?

‘Hey, Harry,’ Lucretia said, taking a deep drink from her glass. Her fingernails were painted baby pink and she wore an array of heavy, gold rings. ‘Are you doing anything for Christmas?’

‘Like what? Grave-visiting?’

‘No, I mean —'she laughed. ‘I don’t know. It must be weird for you being here. Are you going to Hogsmeade?’

‘Probably. I don’t like owl orders.’

‘Oh, me too—'

Abraxas began to cough and they both turned to him. His face was red, his eyes averted.

‘Are you alright?’ Harry said. He glanced at Tom, whose face was impassive. *Too* impassive. Tom raised an eyebrow at Harry challengingly.

‘Sorry-just … went down the wrong way.’ Abraxas waved a hand dismissively. ‘Happens all the time.’

Harry wondered how Tom had forced Abraxas to intervene in his conversation with Lucretia. Silently amused, Harry settled back in his chair.

The conversation went to lighter things as the evening wore on. Abraxas and Lucretia decided now was the ample time to ask Harry lots of questions about his past, forcing him to invent wild stories, while Belinda and Tom smirked to themselves. He didn’t mind it so much when the alcohol hit —everything was fuzzier, softer, and listening to Abraxas and Lucretia’s laughter and disbelief made him feel warm.

‘How’d you think you got sorted into Slytherin then?’ Abraxas said, ‘with your two friends being in Gryffindor?’

Tom —who had been observing most of the conversation and occasionally adding in small, obscure titbits —glanced up.

‘I ... ‘Harry had never thought about it too much. Not since second-year, when he was plagued by fears of the Chamber of Secrets. Yet he was a Slytherin, and while it was different than being a Gryffindor, it was by no means bad. ‘Maybe I’m just more ambitious than them,’ he said. ‘Who knows.’

Lucretia was eating a bowl of olives, her dark hair tossed over her shoulder. She hummed thoughtfully. ‘Slytherin’s about more than ambition. It’s cunning. An ability to adapt.’ She popped an olive into her mouth. ‘*Connections.’*

‘Gryffindors have connections with each other too,’ Harry said, ‘Slytherin isn’t the only house with loyalty — ‘

‘Oh?’ Tom said, ‘and how would you know that?’

‘I *imagine* so. Don’t they seem close to you?’

‘Like family,’ Tom agreed, ‘what with Dumbledore, and the Weasleys and Prewetts, and *Granger —'*

‘You can say you’re jealous of Hermione, it’s okay.’

‘And why would I do that?’

Harry’s lips twitched. ‘Well, it would be the truth. A bit of a strange concept for you, I know —'

‘Harry,’ Lucretia said, biting back a laugh.

‘Oh, right. Sorry, *my lord.’* He drew the words out teasingly, in a tone just above a murmur, and met Tom’s eyes.

They were dark. Slightly foggy. Harry’s insides twisted with heat.

Lucretia had stopped eating her olives and was observing Harry and Tom curiously. Harry shifted in his seat. He ignored how his heart had quickened at the look on Tom’s face, how it thundered in his ears.

‘Merlin, I’m too drunk for this,’ Belinda said. ‘Harry, there’s no chance in hell that you’re going to convince me Gryffindor is anything like Slytherin. They’re so loud, and noisy, and boastful and … no offence.’

‘None taken,’ he said, though an old instinct made him bristle.

Belinda raised her pale eyebrows and her expression turned sly. ‘Oh, I was talking to Lucretia.’

Lucretia immediately began to protest, and Harry —glad the attention was no longer on him—laughed. He turned to Abraxas, who was eating a turkey and stuffing sandwich that he had brought from the kitchen and grinning widely.

‘I’m really glad you’re *not* a Gryffindor,’ he said, ‘even if you’re about the weirdest Slytherin I’ve ever met.’

‘Thanks,’ Harry said dryly, ‘I’m glad I’m not a Gryffindor too.’

The words came out before he fully processed them. Harry paused. The alcohol had loosened his tongue, slowed down his stream of thoughts. Lucretia and Belinda were arguing loudly about the differences in Gryffindor and Slytherin, and Abraxas was watching Harry in surprise.

‘Really?’ he said and beamed. ‘I knew you’d come around to Slytherin eventually.’

‘Well, not quite,’ Tom said, but for some reason, he seemed pleased.

‘Shut up. Aren’t *you* glad I’m not a Gryffindor?’

Tom raised an eyebrow. ‘It’s certainly improved our Quidditch team. Everything else on the other hand …’

‘Oh, you’re such a liar.’

Harry’s head was humming pleasantly. There were two bottles of firewhiskey left, and Abraxas had mixed one of them with pumpkin juice, which no one but he and Belinda liked.

‘Ugh, my head’s spinning,’ Abraxas said and reached out to steady himself by grabbing the table. Instead, he ended up holding Harry’s knee.

‘Please don’t throw up again,’ Belinda said. ‘And why are you holding Harry’s leg?’

He lurched back. Lucretia exploded with laughter and Harry joined in, wondering if he should offer her some water.

‘You know,’ Abraxas began, wincing as he knocked back the rest of his glass, ‘I can’t believe Merrythought brought in that — that *bloody boggart.* What a *joke.’*

‘I’m never going to look at her again,’ Lucretia spat. ‘You know she wanted to talk to me about my bloody mother?’

‘I think she’s alright,’ Belinda said. ‘Better than Slughorn, anyway.’

‘What’s wrong with Sluggy?’

Lucretia's eyes widened in outrage, and she leaned over Harry, intrigued. Her black hair was falling near his face and he carefully brushed it away.

'Better not insult Slughorn in front of Tom,' Harry chimed in.

'Oh, fuck off, Harry.'

Harry simply smirked at him.

'Well, he doesn't give a shit about much, does he?' Belinda said. 'Just drinking and holding parties, and pretending life's one big joke —'she yawned. 'Oh, nevermind. I bet the younger students will be back soon.' She glanced at her wrist and frowned as if expecting a watch to appear from thin air.

Lucretia —who was still giggling quietly to herself—attempted to shrink the remaining bottles of firewhiskey to no avail. Eventually, Tom did it for her which had Lucretia babbling loudly about how great he was.

The candle lights were flickering overhead. Abraxas was leaning against Harry, and telling him a story about second-year, when Alphard (or possibly Orion, it wasn't clear) fell in the Black Lake. 'You should have seen Slughorn's face … and Alphard won't talk about it … ask him next time at Quidditch practice —I swear - priceless.'

Harry snorted with silent laughter and then —despite his better judgement—caught Tom's eye. Tom stood up, running a hand through his hair.

'I'm going to the dorm,' he said. He didn't bother offering a reason, only shrugged lightly and set his glass down on the table.

Harry forced himself to yawn. 'I need to —um—use the bathroom.' His movements weren't half as smooth as Tom's. The ground lurched and his knee banged against the coffee table, prompting Abraxas into laughter. Harry smiled at him good-naturedly and made his way up the stairs.

'Subtle,' Tom said when they reached the boys' dorm. 'Don't you need to come *back* from the toilet?'

'They won't remember.'

It was cooler here. Harry groaned in relief when he pushed open the

door and staggered forward to his bed, collapsing face down on the cool pillow.

‘You’re so dramatic,’ Tom said, but there was a strange note to his voice. Harry was too drunk to decipher it. He made a noise of disagreement against the pillow and sat up.

‘Come over,’ he said, patting the bed as if Tom was a particularly disobedient pet. ‘I want to tell you something.’

Tom raised his eyebrows but complied. ‘You want to tell me what?’

His face was blinding up close. Harry leaned into him, as he had wanted to do all evening. Tom’s eyes were glassy and his lips were curled in amusement, which made Harry grin too.

‘You have a really nice face.’

‘*That’s* what you wanted to tell me?’

‘Yes. You're so —stupidly attractive, it’s ridiculous.’

Tom’s cheeks darkened even as he laughed at him. Harry reached out to touch the pink spot on his cheekbone, ghosting over it with his fingers.

Tom furrowed his brows. ‘You’re touching my face.’

‘You’re blushing.’

‘It was warm in the common room.’

‘Yeah, I’m sure that’s it.’ Harry lifted Tom’s hand to inspect it. *It’s a nice hand,* he thought, and all at once, Tom started to laugh.

‘Sorry, did I say that aloud?’

‘God, you’re pissed.’

‘I’m *not* —'

But Tom was kissing him and his mouth was hot and tasted faintly of alcohol. He cupped Harry’s jaw, moving closer. Harry made a small, contented noise in his throat and kissed Tom back. Everything seemed to spin. The world tipped.

Harry leaned back to look at him but Tom’s face was overwhelming.

Dazed, Harry reached out and touched the hollow of his cheek.

‘What now?’ Tom said teasingly, ‘do I have nice *eyes?’*

‘Oh, give over.’ Harry could smell the sweetness of Tom’s breath and the heat of his skin beneath his fingers. Harry kissed him quickly. Once. Twice. ‘You’re so *pretty*.’

‘Shut up, Harry.’ Tom looked baffled. He was still stroking Harry’s cheek, which he didn’t seem aware of, and his eyes were foggy.

Harry palmed Tom through his robes, whose cock gave a jerk. Harry grinned at the reaction.

‘Can I suck your dick?’

‘Are you *really* asking?’ Tom’s eyes were dark. He stroked back a piece of Harry’s hair, his throat working.

Harry got clumsily to his knees.

‘You’re not going to vomit, are you?’

‘Why would I *vomit?’*

But Harry’s hands didn’t want to cooperate. He pressed his face against Tom’s thigh for a second, closing his eyes. He felt such a rush of emotion, dizzying in its intensity. A muddle of colour and sensation that rose and swelled, unable to be contained.

‘You’re such a mess,’ Tom said, stroking Harry’s hair. His words were slightly slurred. Harry wanted to protest but instead he stayed where he was, hoping Tom would continue to pet his hair. It was a fondness he had never experienced before, something more than that—affection —so palpable that the world seemed to lurch. It bloomed behind his eyes, thrummed through his head, pulsed with every beat of his heart.

Harry sat up, remembering why he was on his knees.

‘You sure you’re alright, Harry?’

‘Great.’

Harry didn’t want to look at Tom, for fear that he would find a name for the feeling. His mind was heavy and cloudy — it was easy to let it flood him, ineffable and disorientating.

He unbuttoned Tom's robes and yanked down his underwear. Took his cock into his hand, giving it several lazy strokes.

Tom made a small, quiet noise in his throat, his hips jerking forward. He was sitting on the edge of Harry's bed, his fingers loosely threaded in Harry's hair.

Harry pressed his fingers against Tom's hip bones, and then took the head of his cock into his mouth. Tom groaned.

It was almost easier now. Harry didn't feel as self-conscious as would have normally, and Tom was more relaxed. Every twitch of his hips, quiet moan, and drunken praise spurred Harry onwards.

'Your mouth feels amazing.'

'You're so fucking good.'

'Oh— fuck —*Harry*.'

Harry swallowed around Tom's cock and he groaned. He was tugging carefully at Harry's hair, trying to restrain himself. Harry glanced up at him, hollowing out his cheeks.

He wasn't sure how much time passed —it all became a blur of gasps and moans and broken noises—until Tom's breathing was more laboured. He was fisting at Harry's hair, his hips jerking forward. Harry gagged a little bit around his cock, glancing up to watch Tom's last remnant of composure crumble.

It was always a maddening sight. Something that should be forbidden in its sheer intimacy but wasn't. Tom gasped and jerked and came with a shudder, and Harry watched him, carefully pulling away.

'Shit,' Tom breathed, letting go of Harry's hair.

Harry swallowed and sat back. He felt a fuzzy mixture of satisfaction and affection. He was still painfully hard and yet Tom was stroking his face, pressing a finger to his mouth, ghosting over his scar with long, slender fingers.

Harry sat back on the bed and Tom leaned forward to kiss him.

'What do you think is happening in the common room?' Harry said when they finally pulled apart. He kissed the corner of Tom's mouth, foggy and lightheaded in a way that was entirely new.

‘Lucretia’s probably confessed she’s dating Prewett. I think Abraxas is the only one who doesn’t know.’

‘He’s always the last to find out things.’

Tom hummed in agreement. His eyes were half-lidded and clouded by desire. Harry could make out the flecks of red in his irises. The slant of his dark lashes.

Tom kissed him again. He brushed his fingers against Harry’s cock, which had been hard for so long that Harry bit back a whine. For once, Tom decided not to tease him. He tilted Harry’s head back with his hand, mouthing along the line of his jaw. Harry leaned into the touch, holding onto Tom’s shoulder, and the feel of his lips hot against his throat, and his hand —

The door flew open and they jerked apart.

Harry blinked at the onslaught of light. He adjusted his robes to hide the fact that he was painfully hard, though his mouth felt obscenely swollen. Tom’s eyes cleared ever so slightly, and he leaned away from Harry to observe the figure standing in the doorway.

Rosier’s expression was frozen. Stiff, his eyes lingered on Tom before finally going to Harry where they stopped.

‘Evening, Edwin,’ Tom said, the final vestige of irritation disappearing from his face. His voice was perfectly level.

Rosier was staring at Harry in such a wild, intense way that Harry swallowed. He wondered if Tom had left a mark on his throat. If Rosier’s dazed expression meant that—despite the snide remarks—he hadn’t truly known about the two of them.

‘We missed you earlier,’ Tom said, when Rosier showed no intention of moving. ‘In the common room.’

Rosier seemed unable to look at Tom.

‘I was busy,’ he said, tearing his eyes away from Harry to stare at the ground. ‘My … my Lord.’

There was a heartbeat where Harry felt sorry for him. Then Rosier’s eyes snapped back to him, this time flinty. ‘What’re you staring at, Potter?’

‘What are you still doing here?’ Harry retorted.

‘You don’t own the dorm. You’re not even a real Slytherin. Just because your whole family’s fucking dead and you can’t go home —'

Tom cleared his throat and Rosier fell silent.

He looked like he was swallowing something vile. ‘How’d you split your forehead open anyway, Potter? Has anyone told you how weird that looks?’

Harry raised his eyebrows. ‘Killing curse to the face,’ he said nonchalantly. ‘Do you not like it?’

‘You’re such a fucking liar.’ He caught Tom’s eye again and faltered. ‘I wanted to talk to you. About —Slughorn. But forget it.’

He stalked out of the dorm.

Harry and Tom looked at each other for a second and Tom sighed. ‘I should see what he wants,’ he said.

But he didn’t move.

‘Yeah, you should.’

The room was swimming. Rosier’s face was flashing through Harry’s mind. His desire had evaporated, leaving something stale in its place. Standing up, he made his way to the bathroom and splashed his face with cold water. When he got back, Tom had left.

Harry didn’t want to go to the common room. He sat on the edge of his bed, eyes sliding across the floor. *Thank god,* he thought, *Rosier hadn’t come in a minute earlier.* The thought was such a paralysing one, and the relief so overwhelming, that Harry laughed.

How’d you split your forehead open anyway, Potter?

His scar was usually concealed by his hair. For one moment, Harry wondered why it hadn’t been. He remembered the heat of Tom’s fingers tracing it, leaving his hair in disarray.

Harry lay back on the bed, watching the dark ceiling above.

There was a suffocating sensation in his chest, squeezing sharply every time he remembered the tender way Tom grinned at him. The way he would burrow his face against the hollow of Harry’s neck. The sleepy

rasp of his voice. The warm glint of amusement in his eyes.

A truth settled in Harry's chest, lodged almost painfully. But his head was pulsing and so were the shadows above the bed. He couldn't care, not now.

Thoughts came in snatches. The bright lights of the common room. The slide of Tom's tongue against his own. Fingers on his scar, his scar, his —

Harry was going to vomit.

The boggart slid into his mind —seamlessly, pushing past a cloud of fog that he hadn't known existed. A voice slivered into his thoughts.

You chose this.

The locket tight against his throat, burning hot, branding. The sensation of being underwater. His lungs burned.

Harry's fingers flew to his forehead. It had been his fault, all of it. They were bound together, connected, and there was no going back. Not when he had *chosen.*

It has to be you, Harry. It's always been you.

The skin of his forehead was smooth and warm. The scar, however, felt cold. Bile rose in his throat and Harry got up, making his way back to the bathroom. Instead of vomiting, he gripped the marble sink and stared at his reflection in the mirror.

He wasn't sure if it was real. Any of it. His own dazed face. Pale. Was he really that pale? The glassy green haze of his eyes. And his scar — faint and jagged but visible even now.

Harry's hands shook. He closed his eyes because the word was lurching, the ground rising beneath his feet and spinning around and around his head. *Please, god, no.*

He pressed his fingers to the mark that had plagued him for the last seventeen years. It pulsed under his fingers.

Warm.

Electric.

Alive.

Horcrux

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay! A quick warning that this chapter's fairly angsty, so apologies in advance.

Harry's head was throbbing dully when he woke. He stared at the bright ceiling for a while, trying to piece together the events of the night before. He remembered the common room and Tom; remembered touching Tom's face and calling him pretty. Harry winced as he got up. Perhaps Tom wouldn't mention it. Even better, he wouldn't remember.

Yeah, Harry thought, making his way to the bathroom, *fat chance of that.*

The memory of Rosier stirred. His stunned expression. The way he had stared at Harry as if all his greatest fears were confirmed. Harry's mouth tasted stale and his throat hurt. He gazed at his bedraggled reflection in the mirror and frowned.

Something awful had happened after it. It flittered at the fringes of his mind, darting out of reach. Something that made his insides squeeze, his skin crawl ...

The memory hit and Harry lunged towards the toilet, the world tipping. Lean forward, convulse, shudder. He vomited down the toilet until there was nothing left inside him. Then —wiping his mouth — Harry numbly made his way to the shower.

The morning passed in a series of events, none of which Harry had any recollection of. He was numb to everything around him: the clamour at the breakfast table, the murderous looks Rosier was shooting him, Abraxas prattling in his ear. He ate breakfast without tasting it, occasionally making noises of agreement to Abraxas when the conversation paused. Even thinking was too difficult.

Halfway through the morning, Harry claimed he had a headache and went back to bed. He gazed at the ceiling unseeingly, hyper-aware of

his thundering heart. It was too much to deal with right then, and just for a moment, just for an hour, Harry wanted to shut it off.

But being alone with his thoughts was worse. They swam in and out of his mind, making his stomach roll. *Dumbledore would have had a plan; a connection like that couldn't travel through time.* But they were shadowy, weak thoughts, overtaken by a perverse, growing horror. *You're going to die. It's the only way.*

Light-headed and dream-like, time ceased to exist. He was no longer in the dorm, no longer in the castle. Laughter whistled through Harry's ears. Everything he had suppressed seemed to burst forward at once.

The door opened but Harry didn't bother looking around. He knew it was Tom. He knew those footsteps better than he did his own.

'You look like shit.'

Tom moved towards Harry's four-poster without a second thought. 'What happened?'

Harry glanced up. Tom stood over him, frowning, his hair wet from the showers.

'Nothing,' Harry said, sitting up. 'Headache.'

Tom made a disbelieving noise. 'Lucretia has some hangover potion if you want it.'

'No.' For one horrible second, Harry thought he was going to laugh. 'It's nothing.'

Tom paused as if he was unsure what to do next. Harry swallowed down the laughter in his throat, but it lodged somewhere, painfully, like a great swollen lump. He stared at the expanse of floorboard instead of Tom. The battered trunk poking out from beneath his bed. The cut of Tom's dark robes.

'Have you been talking to Edwin?'

'Who the hell is Edwin?' Then Harry remembered. 'Rosier? No, have you?'

Tom shrugged. 'Not really. But then what's he going to say to me? I'd like him to try for once to speak his mind. It would be enlightening.'

‘Well, he clearly fancies you,’ Harry said, staring unseeingly ahead—had the space always been so suffocating? ‘That’s why he’s pissed.’

‘You think?’

‘Definitely.’

Tom must have picked something up in Harry’s voice because he cocked his head. ‘I don’t particularly care for Edwin, or find him appealing in the slightest.’ He spoke as though he was speaking to a very simple child. ‘Are you *jealous?’*

‘No,’ Harry said, his voice distant. The thought hadn’t even occurred to him. ‘I mean, it’s *Rosier.’*

‘And you call me the cruel one.’ Tom grinned. ‘You know, Harry, I wasn’t aware you found me so charming.’

‘What?’ Harry groaned. ‘I knew you’d bring that up.’

‘It’s really quite alright.’ He smirked. ‘I think you have a nice face too.’

‘Don’t,’ Harry said, not knowing if he wanted to laugh or be sick. Even seeing Tom seemed to suck all the air from his body. He stood up, throat burning, the words not wanting to come out.

‘Are you sure you’re alright?’

‘I’m fine.’

Harry’s skin was crawling. He opened his mouth and swallowed. ‘You don’t care about our connection anymore, Tom. Why is that?’

‘What?’

Tom’s posture stiffened at once, his expression wary. The momentary flash of unease was enough for Harry’s insides to drop.

‘The connection,’ he repeated, ‘you used to be so *obsessed* with it.’

‘I wouldn’t call it obsessed.’ Tom’s words were nonchalant — controlled, guarded, with a lightness that Harry would have once been fooled by. Now Harry just stared at him and moved towards the door.

‘I’m going to — talk to Dumbledore.’

‘About *what?’*

‘About — ‘

But words failed him when he stared at Tom’s uneasy face. He couldn’t say it, not then—*not yet.*

‘The future. Or did you forget about that too?’

Harry left the dormitory and made his way out of the common room. Instinct guided his footsteps, the halls blurring together.

Tom knew.

A knot was twisting in his stomach, making every exhale difficult.

Tom knew. Tom knew. It was why —

Harry reached Dumbledore’s office without thought and knocked on the door. Not waiting for entry, he pushed it open, eyes adjusting to the bright light.

Dumbledore glanced at him. ‘Harry,’ he said, and with a wave of his hand, the books on his desk slid neatly out of the way. ‘Come in. I must say this is a pleasant surprise.’

Harry stood on the threshold of the doorway. Fawkes was sleeping on his perch, head buried under his wing. On one of the spindly tables, a silver clock hummed and buzzed, and a series of instruments danced about. Spots blinked before Harry’s eyes.

‘Are you feeling well? You look awfully pale.’

Harry didn’t say anything for a long moment and Dumbledore frowned.

‘Harry?’

The gentle tone made something defensive rear up inside Harry. He was aware of all the delicate instruments spinning and whirring; aware that it was the same tone Dumbledore had used when he told Harry about the horcrux, and despite the auburn hair, the youthful face, those concerned eyes were identical to the ones burned in Harry’s memory.

‘I know how Tom and I are connected,’ Harry said. His voice didn’t shake. It was hoarse. Detached. Hollow. ‘I’m a horcrux.’

Dumbledore's eyes widened behind his half-moon spectacles but he didn't look surprised in the way Harry had desperately hoped for. Instead he found the same mixture of sympathy and caution that had stung so bitterly in fifth-year.

'My dear boy,' Dumbledore said, 'I think you should sit down.'

Harry didn't move. The numbness was fading into disbelief —a growing, horrible disbelief that spread through his body like a fever.

'You knew?' he said quietly. 'You *knew?'*

The stack of essays on Dumbledore's desk fluttered. Harry's hands were beginning to tremble.

'You knew that I was — that I have a piece of his *soul* inside of me, and you said nothing?'

'I suspected,' Dumbledore said, as softly as Harry had ever heard him. 'When you told me about the horcruxes you were tasked to find. Such a strange idea, that I would have left you —and only you—that inane task, yet when I heard about the connection between you and Mr Riddle, I found myself beginning to suspect, to wonder … But Harry it was only ever speculation. If I knew with certainty —'

'You wouldn't have said anything. He never did either. It was all *suspecting* and *wondering* and god — this is my bloody life! All my life, I've been living with that scar. I've told you about it. About *him,* and you let me, you let me —'

'Harry —'

He gave a shaky laugh. 'Do you know what your big plan in the future was? I bet you do. I was going to die for your cause. You were raising me to *die,* so Voldemort could be defeated, and you never even told me.

Why do you think that was —too much guilt? Were you just a coward? Or could you not stand the fact that I *worshipped* you, that I would have done anything you asked, and all that time you were counting down the days until I would find out? Even now, you never said anything. You're the same as him.'

It shouldn't have hurt the way it did. The Dumbledore Harry knew was dead. And that Dumbledore —this Dumbledore—didn't believe Harry could handle the truth. Didn't believe he deserved it.

‘I didn’t reveal my thoughts because I hoped they would not be true. Naively, I wanted you to have a better time here —not to be shadowed by the reminders of your past but to find a way to heal from them. However, I should have shared my thoughts with you, Harry, and not hidden behind speculation. I’m very sorry.’

Harry knew it wasn’t Dumbledore’s fault but he was tired of being lied to. His blood was thumping in his ears. *How dare he. How dare he.*

‘It’s my life,’ Harry said. ‘Why did you have to intervene in every aspect of my life? Tell me, *sir*, what made you decide you could use me whenever it suited? Let me believe — even after you died — that you had some sort of plan. God, I was such an idiot.’

Fawkes made a low, crooning noise on his perch and the melancholy ring lingered in the air. Harry’s breathing was sharp. He was meant to die. All this time, Dumbledore had planned his death.

The instruments on Dumbledore’s desk screeched and rattled, emitting siren-like rings. They echoed in Harry’s ears, his throat, his insides seemed to squeeze and inflate like a balloon, ready to burst —

And he wasn’t there, not anymore, but gazing down at the scene. It was a blur of colour and magic; rattle, rattle, the whistle of a clock, the cacophony of noise. A pounding in his ears, the sharp brilliance of Dumbledore’s blue eyes, the painful thunder of his heart.

Dumbledore’s lips were moving but Harry couldn’t make out the words. All he saw was that vivid blueness; a lurch of movement — Dumbledore standing up — Dumbledore moving towards him — a wand — *a wand* —

Harry reared back and the wand flew from Dumbledore’s hand and clattered to the floor.

Backing away from him slowly, Dumbledore raised his hands. ‘Harry,’ he said, and his wand flew back into his grasp. A glass bowl exploded on his shelf but Dumbledore didn’t bat an eye.

‘I’m sorry,’ Harry gasped, flinching away. ‘It was an instinct. I thought —'

What, he was going to attack you? God, you’ve lost it now.

'I shouldn’t have come here.’

His hands were still twitching. His magic felt on edge; it bubbled and spilt forward, and another instrument broke —

'I'm going to go, sir, I'm sorry.'

Harry backed out of the office before Dumbledore had a chance to speak. Quickly, before anything else exploded, he made his way down the corridor, not waiting to see if Dumbledore followed. He couldn't think of the wand, not then. But hadn't it jumped back into Dumbledore's hand? Hadn't it simply been a burst of uncontrolled magic?

Harry shuddered down the feeling of disgust. He ducked into the nearest loo and spent a moment waiting for his breathing to return to normal. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* Once his heart stopped racing and everything no longer spun, he made his way up the stairs. He wasn't fully aware of where he was going until he found himself standing outside the Gryffindor Common Room. For a split second, Harry expected the Fat Lady to swing forward and admit him.

But she was snoozing in her frame, a trail of drool coming from her half-open mouth. Harry waited for a moment and said her name.

Nothing.

'Excuse me — the Fat Lady?' He reached into the frame and tapped her shoulder.

The Fat Lady jumped. 'What do you want? Can't you see I'm having a nap?' She frowned. 'Who are you? Get away — go on, shoo.'

'I need to go into the common room,' Harry said.

She sniffed. 'The common room? There's no common room here. I've never seen you before in my life.'

'Right, there's no need to pretend. I know you guard the Gryffindor Common Room. If you could just open for a second —'

'Absolutely *not.'*

'It's important! I already know where it is anyway, you don't have to tell me the password –'

'No! No! No! No password, no entry.'

Harry gritted his teeth. 'Right, let's see then. Fairy lights, baubles,

tinsel, Godric Gryffindor, ice mice, Christmas candles, fairies, dilligrout, house-elves, bloody *mince pies —'*

The portrait hole swung open but not at Harry's guesses. A small girl stood in the entrance, holding an envelope covered in sparkles. Her eyes widened in terror when she saw him.

'What are you doing here?' she said. 'You're a Slytherin.'

'I am,' Harry agreed, 'I need to talk to someone.'

'You're Harry Potter. Do you want to speak to Hermione Granger? Ooh, is she your girlfriend? Did she tell you where our common room is?'

'No. Now can I get past, please?'

She shook her head. 'Do you want me to find her for you?'

Harry sighed. 'Yes, please. Can you find Ron Weasley too? Tell them … tell them to bring the snitch.'

'The snitch?'

But Harry only crossed his arm and with a final, puzzled look she disappeared into the Common Room and the entrance swung closed.

'Never, in all my years,' the Fat Lady began, 'have I seen *Slytherins* in the Gryffindor Common Room!'

'Well, I'm full of surprises,' Harry said dryly.

They continued to bicker for a few minutes, Harry a lot more affectionately than the Fat Lady. The smile slid from his face when the portrait swung back once again, and Ron and Hermione appeared.

'What's up?' Ron said, making his way into the hall. The girl who hadn't allowed Harry through was standing behind him, still clutching her letter. Ron turned back to her and said, 'don't worry, I'm going to tell Dumbledore. Disgrace, I know, Slytherins in the common room …'

He caught Harry's eye and grinned.

But the sinking feeling was back in Harry's chest and he couldn't manage more than a weak smile. Harry led them to the Room of Requirement and didn't speak until they were sitting down.

A miserable fire flickered in the grate but the longer Harry stared at it, the more the flames distorted. He braced his hand against the arm of the chair and let out a soft breath.

'What do you want the snitch for?' Ron said, 'you don't know how to open it, do you?'

'Harry, you look awful,' Hermione said, 'did something happen?' Without waiting for an answer, she pulled the snitch from inside her robes. 'Here.'

He placed it on the palm of his hand. The delicate wings were not moving but tucked back, cold and metal. How many snitches had he caught in his life? How many times had he agonised over this one, willing it to open?

Harry lifted the snitch and pressed it to his lips. The wings stirred weakly and words bloomed across the centre. *I open at the close …*

Without looking at Ron and Hermione, without looking at anything but that delicate print, Harry said, 'I'm a horcrux. I'm going to die.'

The snitch clicked open and Hermione gasped.

There it was. The resurrection stone sat in his hand, small, black and smooth. Harry lifted it closer to his eyes, touching its dark surface. He couldn't feel excited: the confirmation settled in his gut, numbing his insides. And yet, the resurrection stone …

'Harry,' Ron began carefully, 'are you going to use it?'

He could see his parents. He could see Sirius.

'I ….'

It was a yearning he had never experienced before and Harry was incapable of stopping it from rising.

Who cared if his mother hated him if he finally got to see her face? What did it matter that his father was ashamed? If he thought Harry was a disgrace? If it meant he got to see Sirius *one last time?*

'Not right now,' Harry said and slipped the stone and snitch into his robes. He kept his fingers resting on the stone, unable to help it.

'Harry, I'm so sorry,' Hermione said. 'It doesn't matter if you're —if you're one of them. We love you.'

‘If I’m a horcrux, you mean, and I have to die.’

Hermione was stricken. ‘Don’t say that, Harry. Don’t you dare.’

‘Jesus, mate.’ Ron blew out a shaky breath. ‘What a load of bollocks. You’re not going to die and I don’t give a *fuck* what Dumbledore wanted. He’s bloody dead, isn’t he? And we haven’t done anything about Riddle’s other horcruxes, so why have you suddenly decided this one needs to be destroyed?’

Harry rubbed a hand over his face. ‘I’m not saying now. I’m only saying, if Voldemort ever does rule again, we do need to destroy *all* of his horcruxes. We’ve always known that. Dumbledore was right.’

‘How can you say that?’ Hermione cried. ‘Nothing’s worth you dying for, Harry, horcruxes or not. We can research other ways of getting rid of it —ways that don’t result in you dead. And anyway, who knows how it works now? That horcrux linked you to *Voldemort,* but Voldemort no longer exists. It’s not a piece of *Riddle’s* soul — it’s not keeping *him* alive. Why do you need to get rid of it anyway?’

‘Why do I need to …’ Harry swallowed. ‘It’s Voldemort. It’s a piece of Voldemort inside me.’

They both fell silent at that.

Harry’s skin was crawling. He was trying his hardest not to think about Tom. Tom and the flash of unease that had crossed his face that morning in the dormitory.

‘I guess that’s why I can speak Parseltongue,’ Harry said slowly. ‘Why I had those visions and dreams and why it’s still like that with Tom. The horcrux must recognise his soul or something.’

‘It’s not your fault,’ Ron said at once. ‘It’s your scar. That’s why with him —'

‘It’s not why.’

Harry barely recognised his voice. He kept his fingers on the resurrection stone, tracing over its smooth surface. Did he dare?

‘Fucking hell,’ Ron breathed. ‘Merlin, I can’t believe this. When do you think Dumbledore wanted us to find this out anyway - when we were getting ready to kill Voldemort?’

‘Maybe he knew I didn’t stand a chance. When I died, anyone could have killed him.’

The fire had snuffed out. Harry wondered how the realisation had terrified him so much that morning. Now, it only felt natural. He was a horcrux. He always had been.

‘Harry, please don’t let this affect you,’ Hermione said quietly. ‘It doesn’t make you a different person. It doesn’t change a thing.’

Except it changed everything. Harry was infected with the darkest, most vile piece of magic there was. He was no more a sole person than Nagini was. Forever, he would be tied to Voldemort. There was something *wrong* with him.

‘Do you think Riddle knows?’ Hermione said quietly.

Harry closed his eyes.

‘I don’t know.’

He was drifting. He was weightless. It was funny now, how trivial it all was. When Harry opened his eyes, Ron and Hermione were frozen.

‘Well, nevermind that now.’ Hermione hastily stood up. ‘It’s going to be okay. It doesn’t matter. You’re still Harry. You’re still …’

‘Yeah.’ His throat was full of glass. Harry cleared it and then said, in a much firmer voice, ‘I want it gone.’

Hermione stilled. ‘Are you sure? I don’t know if that’s possible …’

Would she say that if she was the one who had a piece of Voldemort’s soul inside her? Would Ron?

‘We’ll look for a way,’ Ron said.

‘A *safe* way.’

‘What, do you think I was going to suggest we inject him with basilisk venom, or stab him with a fang—'

Harry choked back a laugh. ‘We don’t have to do anything now.’

‘Are you sure?’ Hermione was so pale and concerned that Harry thought she might burst into tears.

‘I’ve been living with it for seventeen years, haven’t I?’

‘Oh, Harry …’

She hesitated for a second and sat down beside him and put her arm around his shoulder. Harry wasn’t used to the contact and stiffened, before slowly relaxing into it. He felt the weight of the resurrection stone in his pocket. *Dumbledore had left it for him. Dumbledore had* known.

Harry thought of his parents —foggy images and memories, patched together by tales he had heard from Sirius and Hagrid.

He didn’t know them.

There were Lily’s blazing eyes from Snape’s pensieve—almond-shaped, the same shade of green as his. James, who stood the same height as Harry, with the same hair that stuck up at the back. Head Boy and Head Girl. Members of the Order. Shiny and unreachable and everything he yearned for.

And deep down, Harry wondered if they would want to see him at all.

Ron and Hermione left reluctantly.

‘We’ll figure it out tomorrow,’ Hermione said, while giving Harry a final hug. ‘I’ll do some research this evening —those horcrux books should still be in the restricted section. Do you want to meet up this evening, or arrange a meeting with Dumbledore?’

It took a while for Harry to persuade them that he was fine. It was mostly the truth: the more time passed, the more he started to feel nothing at all. When he mentioned going back to the common room, they both looked torn. But Harry knew he had to see Tom. There was no point putting it off any longer.

With a final, rather forced smile, Harry left his two friends and made his way back through the corridors. He met Rosier on his way, who froze and gave Harry a foul look, opening his mouth to speak and then turning on his heel and stalking back into the library.

Harry barely blinked at him. Tom wasn’t in the common room but the

dorm. Pulling open the door, Harry's heart spiked. He had been mistaken to think that he no longer felt anything: his insides were starting to constrict.

'What did Dumbledore want?'

Tom was sitting on his neatly-made bed, flicking through a book. He closed it when Harry came in, his expression changing to one of interest.

'Dumbledore?'

'You went to see him a few hours ago.' Tom's voice was mild. Curious. Harry wondered how easily he could truly mask his emotions; how long he had known.

'We were talking about my scar, actually. How it's a horcrux and all that.'

Tom's expression flickered for a split-second. 'Is it really?'

'Is it — 'Harry stared at him. 'God, you're such a liar.'

It was easier to look around the dorm than at Tom. The discarded clothes piled on Avery's vacant bed, the balled-up socks gathering dust in the corner, the edges of a magazine, its glossy cover catching the light.

'A *liar?'*

There was a stain on the wood—what had caused that? A liquorice wand trampled into a paste. A pair of mud-splattered boots, battered and leather.

Harry wanted to say something nasty. It was rising in his throat, stinging, burning, but yet when he spoke the words were hollow. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'I knew you'd react like this.' Tom looked unsure if he should move closer towards him. He hovered on the spot, eventually deciding against it. 'You have such bad memories of Voldemort and horcruxes —you'd never be able to look at it in any way that wasn't influenced by that.'

'It's a horcrux,' Harry said. 'What other way is there to look at it? It's a piece of Voldemort's soul —right after he killed my parents—

embedded in mine. It's a *stain.* It's the darkest, most disgusting piece of magic I can think of. There isn't any other way *to* look at it.'

'The horcrux responds to me,' Tom said, 'it's mine.'

'So you have an extra piece of soul floating around?'

'We share the same soul,' Tom said, 'Voldemort and I, whether you like to admit it or not. If it wasn't my horcrux, there would be no connection. The very fact that we share dreams, and have similar wand cores, and I can *feel your emotions* means that the horcrux is mine.'

'It's not yours,' Harry said. 'You're not the one who has to live with it — with all the headaches, and crazy visions. Who had to watch — watch Voldemort torture someone until they're begging to die; or feel his happiness as he did it —see someone you love die and be able to do *nothing*.'

'Well, that was in the past. Your Voldemort doesn't exist anymore.'

Harry looked at Tom for a moment, willing his voice to stay steady. 'How long have you known?'

Tom hesitated. Harry could almost see the wheels turning in his brain — *lie,* they seemed to say, *or will he know?*

'God,' Harry said, when the silence lasted a split second longer than necessary. 'How can you —'

'I never knew for certain,' Tom interrupted.

He sounded so much like Dumbledore that Harry wanted to laugh. 'But you liked *suspecting,* didn't you? Did it make you feel clever? Having another piece of my life, and just deciding not to mention it.'

Harry's scar was starting to prickle. He felt such a stabbing of loathing —that bloody scar, how much he hated it —that for half a second, he was overcome with the desire to scratch it out.

'I'm going to get rid of it,' Harry said.

'By what means? *Killing yourself?'* Tom laughed coldly. 'You can't get rid of a horcrux. You can *destroy* it, by also destroying the host, but that's madness. It's so deeply embedded into you —you've had it since you were *one*—that you would most definitely die.'

Harry shrugged. ‘Well, I’ll find a different way. I want it gone.’

Tom stopped and stared at him, unable to comprehend the conviction in Harry’s tone. Then he began to pace around the dormitory like a restless animal. ‘Research it all you want,’ he said, ‘but it’s not possible. Don’t you think I know about horcruxes? Haven’t I studied them for *years?*’

‘Yeah, well forgive me if I don’t trust anything you say, Tom. You’ve only been *lying* to me for months.’

‘It wasn’t lying —'

‘What do you call it then? Avoiding the truth?’

‘The *truth* is that you only want the horcrux removed because it reminds you of your past. If you think it’s a way of getting the upper hand on me —’

‘It’s not all about you,’ Harry snapped. ‘It’s *mine.* You have all your other stupid horcruxes —go and make a dozen for all I care.’

They stared at each other. Tom’s jaw was clenched and his eyes were fathomless. With each prickle of pain that went through his scar, Harry felt more and more feverish. His heart was pounding in his ears and his chest kept squeezing sickeningly every time he thought of the expressionless look on Tom’s face.

‘You never minded the connection before,’ Tom said, ‘why are you so defensive now?’

‘You wanted it gone as well! Unless you suddenly *like* me having your dreams. It’s not even a real horcrux of yours. You have others.’

‘Others that you plan on destroying,’ Tom said coldly. ‘There’s no point pretending that isn’t your intention with all of them. They’re so *vile* and *disgusting,* just like Voldemort. Well, I *am* Voldemort —'

‘I think you’re getting a little side-tracked. I don’t care about your other horcruxes. I want this one gone.’

‘But you do care, don’t you?’

Harry hesitated for a split-second —*a flash of scarlet, blood oozing from the diary, the locket branded against his chest*—and Tom laughed.

‘I’d never destroy your horcruxes if you didn’t decide to take over the

Wizarding World.'

'And give up everything I want in life? You've always known my intentions —you know *exactly* how it's going to go and you can deny it as much as you want. Did you honestly think I'd change my plans to appease you?'

His face was so cold that Harry almost flinched. The remark felt like a sting; it spread outwards, festered, until Harry felt almost as cold as Tom looked.

'I'm getting rid of it, Tom,' he said. 'I don't care if I *die* in the process, it's better than being tied to you.'

'You're being a child. You've managed to live your whole life unaware of what it was, but now you want it gone. To do what — spite me?'

'It's all you care about,' Harry spat. 'You're so obsessed with staying alive —so paranoid — that you'd do anything to prevent it. Even chase after a horcrux that impacts you in *no way—'*

'Are you sure of that?' Tom raised his eyebrows. 'The way I see it, Harry, is that I want to stay alive and you so conveniently hold my *soul*.'

Harry faltered for a second and a strange look crossed Tom's face like he wanted to take the words back but didn't. Then it smoothed out — cold and impassive and as uncaring as Harry had ever seen it.

'You…' Harry began, but his throat hurt. 'Well, I can't say I'm surprised. The horcrux, the connection, that's all you care about. What do you think I am — a fragment of you? Another one of your stupid objects?'

Tom tilted his head. 'Of course not.'

'But you do. It feeds your ego. You *love* the fact that we're connected, that I *hold a piece of your soul.'*

Harry let out a breath. His chest hurt and every time he looked at Tom, it would wrench horribly. *All those times Tom had touched his scar. All those times he had kissed him. Smiled, all-knowing and soft. But not soft — not really.*

'All this time,' Harry breathed, 'you've known and said nothing.'

Tom shrugged. ‘I would have told you if you asked. It seemed like a touchy subject.’

Harry’s heart quickened. ‘Touchy for you, maybe. After all, you're the one who's obsessed with it. So desperate to preserve your life, so *crazy* that you think a stupid trace of Voldemort in my head will help you become immortal. It won’t. You’re going to fucking die, *Tom*. Start accepting it.’

Tom’s eyes widened. Finally —Harry thought—finally a reaction. But the surprise was quickly tamped out by coldness. Tom’s expression hardened and he crossed the dorm, lips curling in contempt.

‘We’ll see,’ he said. ‘But if you want to destroy all my horcruxes —if you really wish to remove *all* the possibilities— then you have to die too. And I *win.’*

‘It would be worth it,’ Harry spat. ‘Don’t you know that by now? I’d rather *die* than see Voldemort come back again. I’d rather kill you myself —destroy every one of your bloody horcruxes. I’d do it happily, so let’s not pretend anymore.’

Tom’s face shut down. ‘Is that supposed to bother me? I know that’s always been your plan, *dear,* and as touching as this has all been, I’m not particularly surprised.’

‘That’s why you don’t want to kill me anymore,’ Harry said. ‘Because you think I’m a fucking vessel for your *soul*.’

A muscle jumped in Tom’s jaw. There was a wild, conflicted look on his face — more torn than Harry had ever seen it. Then he said, in a voice that was smooth and precise, ‘did you honestly think I *cared*?’

Before Harry could answer —before Harry could do any more than freeze — Tom laughed. His face had closed off. All the emotion disappeared from his flat, mocking eyes. ‘What — *what* did you think, Harry? That it wasn’t because of the horcrux? Not because we are connected?’

He was pacing the dorm restlessly as he spoke, each word like a punch.

‘That’s so *sweet.’*

Harry felt like he had swallowed poison. There was no reason why it should have hurt so much; why his throat was burning; why the sharp

edge of Tom's voice was worse than any curse.

'Well, this has been fun,' Harry said coldly, 'but I'm done pretending. I suppose you're right, Tom, I am just kidding myself. Because this *joke* of a relationship is over.'

'Over? Because I don't want you to destroy the horcrux and *kill yourself* in the process?'

'Yes,' Harry said. 'It means nothing anyway, let's not pretend.'

Tom stared at him for a moment, a metre of floor between them. He looked like he was going to move; that he was trying very hard not to. Then he swallowed. His Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. 'Oh, well,' he said and shrugged. 'I guess that's it then.'

Harry couldn't vocalise the sting in his throat; find words for the lump in his chest; the pain so intense he felt winded.

For a second, Tom looked like he wanted to take it back —but he didn't.

'I guess so,' Harry said in a hollow voice. He didn't bother with any cutting words but moved towards the door, unable to look at Tom for a second longer. It was all muggy, surreal, and words failed, there was nothing left to say, not anymore, but why, *god,* why —

'No, Harry, wait …'

Harry spun around.

'*What?'*

A moment lingered between them. Harry wasn't aware of holding his breath but it was becoming more and more impossible to stand there without breaking something or shouting or saying all the nasty, painful truths he kept bottled inside.

Tom stiffened. 'Nothing,' he said, in the same empty tone that Harry had used. 'Good luck with your scar thing. What are you thinking – *another* killing curse might do the trick?'

That mocking smile was the last thing he saw. Harry left the dormitory and made his way through the common room. There was no need to rush. His steps were slow, mechanic, the only sound in the darkened dungeons. It was better than focusing on the sting of

betrayal; the ever-spreading ache that radiated through him, corrosive and rotten.

Harry pushed open the doors of one of the discarded classrooms and a dingy torch sprung to life. The air was musky and the desks were thick with dust, glowing a weak, acid yellow. Harry sat down behind a charred cauldron and stared at the dust particles floating through the air.

It was all over now.

He glanced around carefully, as if expecting a ghost to materialise through the blackboard. But he was alone. Numbly, distantly, he took the resurrection stone from his pocket and held it in his hands.

Did it really matter anymore, what they thought of him? It would only echo what he already knew. Still, he hesitated, the desire that radiated through him making him almost sick.

Harry brought the stone closer to his mouth. 'I'm sorry,' he said softly. 'I know I messed up. And I'm going to get rid of it. I shouldn't have — I never meant …'

Did he dare?

Harry held his breath and turned the stone over in his hands. The classroom was quiet. His heart was thumping painfully in his ears.

'I'm sorry,' Harry said again. *Please, please, please.* 'I'll do better. It's over now. I don't care if you hate me. I just need …'

He turned the stone over. He pressed it to his lips. *No.* Tapped it with his wand. *No*. Shook it so violently that it almost slipped from his hands, hit the cold tiles beneath. *No, no, no, no.*

'Please,' Harry whispered, 'please work. *Please*.'

No-one appeared.

Harry pressed the cold stone against his lips. *Sirius,* he thought. He'd do anything to see him one more time. *Anything.*

But the classroom was silent except for Harry's pleas. The damp torch flickered, its flame weakening with every moment that passed.

Your dead don't exist anymore.

Harry's eyes stung. He had never felt more childish than he did then. He curled the stone very tightly in his hand so that its edge was pressing deeply into his palm. Throat burning, eyes prickling, he sat in the darkened classroom, clutching the resurrection stone, until the torch above him flickered and faded and, finally, snuffed out.

Endings

Chapter Notes

> Quick warning that there is some very minor self-harm in this chapter, close to the beginning. It's nothing graphic or serious but I thought I'd mention it nevertheless.

‘Harry? Are you listening?’

Harry looked away from the scratched library desk to Hermione’s concerned face. She was watching him, her brows furrowed. There were shadows under her eyes, deep and purple, and her hair was wild. He glanced away at once.

‘Of course.’ Harry cleared his throat. ‘You were saying about how –er —Dumbledore doesn’t recommend removing the horcrux.’ He blinked away the spots before his eyes. ‘Which confirms that he planned my death.’

The library was unbearably hot and the back of Harry’s neck itched. He felt muggy and disorientated. How much time had passed? How long had they been leafing through books, making weak attempts at conversation?

‘Well, you’re not going to die,’ Hermione said firmly. ‘And for god’s sake, stop thinking about Riddle.’

He looked at her again. ‘I’m not thinking about him.’

‘Well, that’s good, but if you *were* –’

The sky was a dull grey out the windows, the grounds empty.

‘... You can talk about it, you know. You don’t have to pretend it’s all fine, and you don’t care –’

‘Because I don’t,’ Harry said coldly. ‘I’m more concerned with the fact that I have a horcrux stuck in my head.’

‘Bullshit.’

Harry and Hermione both blinked at the conviction in Ron’s tone. Ron slammed the leather-bound book in front of them closed and rested his elbows on the tabletop. ‘I know you’re annoyed about Riddle. It’s

obvious.'

'I'm not –'

'And I hate that – that absolute *bastard,* but for god's sake, Harry, stop pretending you feel the same way. I mean, you were practically dating him. You don't have to keep bottling it up–' he faltered at the look on Harry's face.

'Well, I have nothing to say about it,' Harry said shortly. 'It's finished. I'll get over it. Big deal.'

He bit the inside of his cheek. His scar was starting to throb —a dull steady pain that radiated through his whole body. Did they always have to pry? To be so nosy?

Harry stood up from the table and muttered something about the bathroom.

Horcrux. Horcrux. Horcrux.

He had never felt revulsion like it before, as he stared at his reflection in the mirror. If he closed his eyes, he could feel it under his skin, crawling, throbbing, burrowing into his thoughts. His hands shook.

Like a tendril of smoke, Harry could almost see it. A rotting, blackened organ; an infected limb. Something that needed to be severed. Removed.

He clenched the white marble of the sink, tasting copper in his mouth. When he was ten, he had liked the scar. He thought it looked cool.

Another stab of pain rippled through his temple and Harry dug his fingers into the scar without thought. It wasn't relief, but the sting of pain made him gasp, releasing the tightness in his chest. Hunching over the sink, he sunk his fingers in as deep as he could, relishing in the distraction. But the scar wouldn't open; the rotting thing wouldn't evade him.

Harry squeezed the sink as hard as he could. His ears were thrumming. A cutting curse? Or were his hands shaking too badly? Would opening up his head be worth it if it meant he still had to live with the horcrux, still feel it buried under his skin? It seemed to mock him: irritated, red, the permanent brand of Voldemort.

Harry patted his hair down over his forehead and straightened up. The

fuzziness was dulling. Seventeen years, he thought, since the green light of the killing curse, and his mother's pleas; his mother begging to take her instead, to spare his life, *his life* —

Harry left the bathroom.

'It's not worth dying for,' Harry said when they sat at the table for several long minutes. 'You're right. And Tom can go to hell if he thinks he's worth that much. If he thinks I'd let him control my life.'

His hands weren't shaking any longer and his voice was steady. Hermione gave him a fleeting, puzzled look. 'Well, good,' she said firmly. 'And anyway, we've been looking at books for too long. Do you want to get some fresh air?'

Harry didn't particularly care what they did, but he smiled for her benefit. 'Did *you* just say we've been looking at books for too long?'

'Don't get used to it. And would you pass me my bag?'

Snow crunched underfoot as they made their way down the winding path. Hermione was bundled up in a bobbly red hat and a lumpy, homemade scarf. The tip of Ron's nose was red. It had been two days since Harry and Tom had argued and Harry slept with the resurrection stone under his pillow, keeping his hand resting on its cold surface. It made him feel closer to them, even a tiny bit. He had slept dreamlessly the past two nights and woken to the stillness of the boys' dorm, the dark, and the slide into reality like a dousing of cold water.

Two days and it already felt like too much.

'I know it hurts now,' Hermione began tentatively.

They weren't good at feelings, the three of them. He preferred it when they silently understood one another; when there was an unspoken connection.

‘But it will fade. And it’s best to end it now, because in the long-run —'

‘I know, Hermione,’ Harry said. ‘The whole murdering each other thing.’

‘Exactly. And even after school - he works in Borgin and Burkes, doesn’t he? Think of how messy that would be —Riddle making more horcruxes, expanding his Death-Eater circle. It wouldn’t be like Hogwarts. You couldn’t predict it, or watch him, or be one step ahead.’

‘I know,’ Harry said again. ‘It was crazy to let the whole thing start. I’m really sorry. I suppose I thought — since we’re here now —that things would be different.’ He cleared his throat. ‘And anyway, at least we know what his horcruxes are. I didn’t fancy having to kill Nagini.’

Ron shuddered. ‘No,’ he said, ‘God, to think we were going to do that. Kill Voldemort. Face the whole bloody lot of them, Death Eaters and giants and whatever the hell else. *Mental,* isn’t it?’

‘I suppose that’s one good thing,’ Hermione said. ‘We don’t have that responsibility anymore. We can just go on with our lives. Find jobs, somewhere to live …’

Harry stared into the distance. The bare trees were stirring faintly in the wind and the surface of the Lake was black in the fading light. He wondered if he would ever be able to live a normal life with the horcrux; if Tom was right and he wouldn’t even like it.

‘Dumbledore would have researched the horcrux,’ Harry said slowly, ‘all the time he knew. And he never mentioned it — he never mentioned it because he knew I had to die.’

‘Well, it’s not happening then,’ Hermione said, ‘we’ll keep looking but I don’t see how you dying just to remove that - that *thing* - is feasible in the slightest.’

‘I know, Hermione,’ Harry said quietly. His scar was itching but he refused to touch it again. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and exhaled the cold air.

‘It’s going to be okay, mate,’ Ron said. He followed Harry’s eyes to the murky surface of the Lake. ‘We’ll keep looking.’

Secrets of the Darkest Arts was not in the restricted section and when Hermione asked, the librarian gave her a disgusted look and demanded that she explain what she was looking for at once. It didn't matter though: they had practically memorised the passages on horcruxes last year and nothing they could think of was remotely helpful. Instead, Ron and Hermione were adamant on keeping Harry distracted. They kept to his side at all times: Hermione, wanting to make time-tables and do school work and talk about the latest scandal in the prophet; Ron to play Quidditch and chess and pay visits to the kitchens. Harry didn't mind it though — the Slytherin common room was unbearably quiet now and every glimpse of green reminded him of Tom.

Harry knew Tom's round schedule by heart. He knew that Tom visited the library in the evenings; that he didn't get up until ten o'clock on the weekend and spent too long in the shower. He knew how to avoid him. How to stay on different sides of the castle and dwell in the empty space. Ignore the way a broom closet would bring back that stab of pain; ignore the stillness of the Slytherin table; the way they'd avoid each other during meals.

He pored over books on dark magic and ignored the throbbing in his head. Abraxas and Belinda had both noticed something was wrong but Harry didn't want to talk about it yet.

Belinda's last day before she went home for Christmas crept up on them. She and Harry sat by the fire and Abraxas, green in the face, said that he was going to visit Slughorn and bolted from the common room before either of them had the chance to speak. In the silence that followed, Harry tried to think of something comforting to say and fell short.

'You know what it's like, don't you, Harry, to want to protect someone?' Belinda was playing with the ends of her navy scarf, chewing her lip.

Harry was thrown by the question. 'Yeah,' he said, and then, more slowly, 'your sister?'

He forgot about his problems at once. Belinda turned to him and laughed dryly. 'I'm going to see her one last time before they leave.'

'Can't you do something?'

‘Maybe,’ she said, and a furtive look crossed her face. Her eyes were even harder to decipher than Tom’s. ‘But you’re not going to like me very much after it. It’s not right, or noble, or good, or anything you stand for. But I need to keep her safe.’

‘And you—'Harry swallowed. ‘*You’re* going to be safe too?’

Belinda waved her hand. ‘Maybe. But that’s not the important thing.’

Harry wondered when she had decided. How many sleepless nights she had mulled over it. And *what* it was, that would make him think so lowly of her. Blackmail? Murder?

‘I wanted to tell you in advance. For when you hate me.’

‘I’m not going to hate you,’ Harry said. ‘And whatever you’re doing, it’s not selfish. It’s … desperate. It’s for your sister.’

Belinda smiled slightly. ‘Yes, well, we’ll see. And look after Abraxas for me, would you? Distract him or something.’

‘Maybe I’ll tell him the real way I ended up here - that would be a distraction.’

‘Exactly. And oh - Harry?’ She hesitated. ‘I’m sorry you fell out with Tom. Really.’

Her eyes were searching but the memory of the horcrux was too fresh. Harry cleared his throat and looked away. ‘Thanks,’ he said, rubbing the back of his neck. ‘Look after yourself, yeah? Owl me if you need anything.’

‘Like what? Are you going to apparate to my home?’

‘If you need me to.’

She laughed. ‘God, you’re an odd one. But I appreciate it, I do ….’ She stood up and paused.

‘Edwin,’ Belinda said, lifting her bag from the chair beside Harry. ‘Can we help you?’

Harry followed her eyes.

Rosier stood a little distance away from them, his jaw clenched. He was fidgeting with his hands; brimming, it seemed, with indignance, as though he had left an argument or been subjected to ridicule.

A flare of pain shot through Harry's head.

'No,' Rosier said, rubbing his hands down his robes. 'Haven't you left already?'

'Tomorrow,' Belinda said, arching her eyebrows. 'Nice to know you care though. I'll remember that.'

'Whatever.' He shifted from foot to foot, never glancing away from Harry.

'You can go on,' Harry told Belinda. 'I'll see you later.'

'Oh, I'm sure it won't be too long. Edwin looks like he's ready to *cry*. Isn't that right, dear?'

But before Rosier could answer, she turned on her heel. Rosier stared after her for a second, his face red. Then, abruptly, he faced Harry. It was just the two of them in the common room. Rosier stood over Harry, his face set. He seemed to be preparing for something — but when Harry didn't speak first, he took a step forward and then another.

'God, Potter,' he said, 'I heard the funniest story about you earlier.'

'Really?' Harry tilted his head. 'I can't say the same, but then you're sort of a joke anyway, so…'

Rosier's nostrils flared. '*Hilarious,'* he spat, 'but you don't have Tom around to protect you anymore. He finally realised what you are — a traitorous, filthy, good-for-nothing halfblood.'

Harry stiffened. 'You think I need Tom to protect me? From what — you? That's hilarious.'

'We'll see. You strut around here, acting like you're a pureblood. But you have no power anymore. You're *nothing* and everyone knows it.'

'They must like me for my charming personality then.'

'What the *fuck* is wrong with you, Potter —' Rosier stepped into his face. His voice was still raspy and his eyes were wide. Every word was punctuated with a heavy breath.

'You're so easy to wind up. If you honestly think you can scare me, just because you're jealous and annoyed —'

‘Jealous?’ Rosier stepped away at once. ‘Of what? The fact that you’re so much of a *joke* — so much of a fake Slytherin — that you have to get off with Riddle to prove you’re not a complete waste of space? Do you think you’re special because he gave you the smallest shred of attention?’

‘I never said I was special.’

‘Because you’re the same as everyone else! Don’t you see? You’re not different. He doesn’t like you more. And while you may not bow for him, you serve him another way don’t you, Potter. Right down on your knees. I bet you were fucking *gagging* for it —'

Harry stood up so suddenly that Rosier faltered.

‘What did you just say?’

Rosier’s throat bobbed. ‘Oh, please,’ he spat. ‘It’s true. And now that he’s bored fucking you, you’re back to being nothing and everyone’s going to finally see it.’

Harry’s wand flew into his hand. At the sight of it, Rosier flinched and clumsily reached for his own. Before he had the opportunity to do any more than rummage in his pocket, however, Harry summoned it too.

‘Is that right?’ he said coldly.

‘Yes.’ Rosier took another step backwards. ‘He just wanted to break you. Take you off your stupid fucking pedestal. And now you’re the same as me.’

Harry cut the distance between them.

‘One slight difference,’ he said, watching Rosier’s eyes flicker towards his wand, ‘Tom never even looked at you, did he?’

‘What — ‘

‘It’s pathetic how jealous you are. I mean, I get it — you’re so obedient and loyal, the perfect death eater scumbag, really, but still he doesn’t care about you. Now, *that* has to sting.’

‘You don’t have a clue —'

‘I’m sick of you taking your problems out on me,’ Harry said. ‘I don’t care if you’re insecure, or jealous, or just dying for attention. But this issue you have with me — this thing, where you think I give

a *crap* what you think — is going to stop.'

Laughter bubbled in Rosier's throat. 'Did I touch a nerve? Aww, Potter, I'm sure Tom used to like you. Though why I don't know …' He froze.

Harry held Rosier's wand between his two hands, pressing down slightly on the wood. It could splinter, so easily. A great *snap* that would echo through the room.

'Don't you dare,' Rosier breathed. 'Don't —'

'What,' Harry said, running his hand along the wood, 'snap it? But I'm sure you could buy another one …'

'I fucking hate you, Potter. I *hate* you! You make me sick.'

'It's really not looking good for you,' Harry said casually. 'But do go on. It would be rude to stop you now.'

'You'll be expelled. I promise —'

'Me?' Harry raised his eyebrows. 'When you accidentally broke your wand, messing around with curses?'

Rosier went pale. 'You,' he began, and swallowed. '*Don't.'*

'What is this anyway - dragon-heartstring?' Harry hummed. 'I hope it's not phoenix feathers, you'd never repair them. I mean, you could tape it up … maybe …'

Rosier lunged at him. Instinctively, before a fist collided with his face, Harry flicked his own wand and sent Rosier staggering back.

'God,' he breathed, tossing Rosier his wand. '*What* is your problem?'

Rosier stared at the wand on the floor and then back to Harry. Quickly, awkwardly, he snatched it up and aimed it at him.

'Go on,' Harry said, 'try it. I'll only disarm you again.'

His head was prickling. He wondered if Rosier had been talking to Tom and if his outburst had anything to do with it. What had Tom said, to make him so angry?

'You think you're great, don't you, Potter? Because you got attacked by Grindelwald and had to learn to fight with all your dirty mudblood

family.'

He flinched backwards when Harry raised his wand.

'Wait! Don't!'

Harry smiled. *'What* was that you said? About me and Tom?'

'You … I …'

'*Yes?'*

'You're … you're …' he licked his lips. 'I didn't mean it.'

'Oh?' Harry leaned in closer to him. 'I don't really give a damn if you meant it or not, but from now on you don't even talk to me. No more stupid rumours, no more glaring at me across the classroom, no pathetic attempts at starting fights. *Nothing.'*

He lowered his voice. 'And if you do? If you even say one little thing, I *will* snap your wand in half and you can cry to Slughorn all you want, but nobody will do anything. Not Slughorn, not Dippet, and not fucking Tom. What is it you all love saying - house matters stay in the house? It'll be just you and me, Rosier, and I don't care what your fucking father does or who your friends are. I think you're *pathetic*.'

They stared at each other for a long moment. Rosier's eyes went from Harry's wand to his face and back again. He opened his mouth and paused. Gaped like a fish.

'Are we clear?' Harry said. 'Or are we going to have to go through this again?'

'No, no … I get it, Potter. You're fucking *crazy,* I understand.'

Rosier backed away from him until he was halfway across the common room. When there was a suitable distance between them, he turned and said, 'even if I don't say it, everyone knows you were shagging Riddle. It's the only reason any of them pretended to like you.'

A shadow shot from Harry's wand and Rosier flew backwards. He hit against the coffee table, sending it toppling, and another shadow came, dark and twisting—

Rosier dived out of the way.

‘I get it, Potter! I’m fucking going!’

Harry was too stunned to say anything for a moment. Then — acting entirely on instinct— he moved forward to where Rosier stood.

‘Are you alright?’

Rosier flinched backwards. ‘Am I — you’ve got to be kidding me. You fucking cursed me, with god knows what. Did you learn that one from Grindelwald?’

Harry didn’t respond.

Rosier’s lips were trembling and his eyes were blown wide. Harry realised that he was crowding over him and stepped back.

‘I didn’t …’ Harry began.

‘What, mean to do it? Are you *eleven?’*

But before Harry could speak, Rosier shoved past him and left the common room.

Harry sat down on the sofa. His scar was no longer prickling and adrenaline surged through his body. Phoenix feathers were fickle, weren’t they? It would hardly be the first time his wand had acted on its own accord. And then there had been no possibility that it was because of the Elder Wand. Then it has simply been the connection … perhaps the horcrux acting on its own, in a final survival attempt …

Harry closed his eyes.

He didn’t feel regret for what he had done. Instead, there was a growing satisfaction, the first emotion that felt good in days. He was *sick* of Rosier’s snide remarks. Of the constant goading, the slowly simmering resentment. The comments he had made about Tom.

Harry’s smile faded. He reached for his bag but no longer wanted to be in the common room. The image of Tom from the night Rosier had walked in on them was playing in his mind.

They had been kissing, drunkenly, and Harry had felt so light. It lingered between them, a great, tangible warmth. And they didn’t need to talk, not then, for they had been laughing - Harry wasn’t quite sure what it had been about. He could still feel the way Tom smiled against his mouth, the soft insistent press of his lips. And Harry kept

touching Tom's hair and marvelling at the feel under his fingers. He thought it had been something, something *more*.

Harry stood up and made his way back to the library. Horcruxes, he thought, shutting it away. That's all it had been in the end.

A crack ran down the statue of Salazar Slytherin, splitting his monkey-like face in two. His eyes glittered in the gloom and his jagged grin stretched wide and mocking. Tom stood in a pile of rubble. There was a shattered pillar to his left, white porcelain sprayed outwards like bone. A cracked serpent lay at his feet and another coiled half a metre away, its grey scales reflecting in the puddles.

Tom exhaled slowly through his nose and looked around the Chamber. He could feel his magic around him. It hung in the air, dark and strong and soothing. It was good to get it out. His body seemed to *hum*.

Stepping over a pile of rat skulls, he focused his magic on the cracked pillar. Rebuilding was a finer process than destroying but he liked the finesse it required. He could coax his magic with a focus that blocked everything else out, weave it precisely, never stopping for a second of hesitation. There was no time for doubt then, no time for anything else.

Rubble and stone rose around him, spiralling through the air. Tom flicked his wand and the pillar began to piece together; another flick and the snake rose from the ground, its long body writhing.

He didn't think of Harry, not when he was working. The anger that rose within him wasn't yet dulled, no matter how many things he smashed. It was a poisonous, festering thing; a betrayal that made his body hot, his skin itch.

It never should have become what it was.

The chamber was quiet. The statues were repaired and Salazar's mossy face stared down at him. Tom made his way towards where the basilisk slept and stopped. He had the wildest desire to set her free again and see what would happen in the school. Anything to distract him from the boredom; from the ever-growing frustration; the teeth-

clenching desire to do something.

It *stung.*

Since when did Harry decide anything? And since when did Tom care at all what he thought? He wanted Harry to suffer. He wanted him to beg, to kneel, to *die.*

Before he wrecked something else, Tom stalked out of the chamber.

Harry would get over it, he thought, once his ridiculous pride allowed him to realise dying wasn't a plausible option. And he'd realise — as it had always been known, just underneath the surface — that being bound to Tom wasn't such a horrible thing. If anything, it was the opposite.

The week dragged on and Tom grew restless. Even though they shared the same living quarters, he barely saw Harry at all. Harry wouldn't arrive in the dorm until well into the hours of the morning, so silent that only the creak of a mattress betrayed his presence. They missed each other in the mornings and Tom would wake to an empty dorm or the pale light of dawn. Meals too, Harry was elusive. Often, he sat at the Gryffindor Table, with his two insufferable friends; other times he'd be with Abraxas and never meet Tom's eyes.

It was embarrassing. It was infuriating.

Perhaps he was using his invisibility cloak.

It was the end of the week before they finally ran into each other. Tom spent the morning researching in the library and replying to a letter from Belinda. He had run into Rosier at lunch, who was sulking about something Tom didn't particularly care for. Then —while passing by a statue that was humming Christmas carols —he spotted Harry rounding the corner.

Harry faltered for a second, and then lifted his head.

Tom —whose heart had given an odd, traitorous leap at the sight— spoke before he was aware of doing so.

'Hello, Harry.'

Harry's eyes were dull and framed by dark rings. His hair fell limply over his forehead, obscuring his scar from view. He looked a mess. He looked exhausted.

Tom wanted to reach out and touch him.

'Hello, really? Are you serious?'

He had missed that voice.

'Just wait a minute,' Tom said before Harry could walk on. 'Don't you think we should talk?'

Harry raised his eyebrows. 'By all means, go ahead. *Talk*.'

Tom hadn't planned this far ahead. He chewed his lip between his teeth and wondered if there was any way he could amend this with his pride still intact.

'Are you still mad about the whole horcrux thing?' At the look on Harry's face, Tom winced. 'I know I should have told you.'

'I thought you don't care.'

'I don't,' Tom said at once. Harry's voice was low and mocking and made all his instincts bristle. 'But you're being ridiculous. Nothing has changed except you know what's causing the connection now. It's not my fault you got hit with a killing curse when you were a baby. I didn't make you a horcrux.'

Harry smiled bitterly. 'But you love the fact that I am one. Or have you forgotten the reason for this in the first place?'

Tom stiffened. 'Of course not. What does that have to do with anything?'

When Harry didn't speak, Tom shifted uneasily from foot to foot and added, 'you're so *dramatic* about everything. I don't know why you feel the need to analyse it so much. Wasn't it easier when we just got along? So you know about the horcrux — that doesn't mean everything has to change. I know you want to get rid of it but that's impossible. And you'll have to accept that eventually. But what's wrong with the rest?'

Don't you like me?

Harry swallowed, and then said, in a perfectly flat voice, 'it's not just

the horcrux, Tom. I'm done pretending. It's never going to work. This relationship we have — or whatever the hell you want to call it — is crazy. It was always going to end so let's not deny it. I can't do it anymore.'

'So you want to break up with me to save it potentially happening in the future? Do you realise how illogical that is?'

'Did you really say *break up with me*?' Harry looked like he was going to laugh for a second —Tom wished he would—but then his face sobered.

'It's not *potentially* going to happen. It is going to happen. We believe in completely different things. You can't compromise the fact that you want to go on a murderous rampage and cut your soul into half a dozen pieces, while I actively try to put you in Azkaban.' Harry ran a hand through his hair and sighed. 'It was over to begin with.'

His scar was visible through the thick strands of his fringe. Red, thin, jagged. Tom wondered why his feet were glued to the ground, why he was fighting with his instincts, and why the desire to break things had drifted to the back of his mind at the sight of Harry's weary face.

'You know it was crazy. You know I don't agree with you on anything. And it was all going to end horribly —and painfully, let's be honest. I'm tired of pretending, and denying it, while you don't even *care*.' Harry's face was firm. Decided.

Tom's insides were starting to freeze.

'I have no intention of ending our relationship,' he said as calmly as he could.

'What, ever?'

Push it aside, ignore, *ignore* —

'Yes.'

There was a flicker of emotion then. Harry's eyes widened and he took a small step closer, twisting his hands together. The faint outline of his scar was visible against the back of his hand*: I must not tell lies,* in neat, jagged letters.

Tom almost laughed.

‘That’s, that’s …’ Harry swallowed. ‘That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.’

Tom bristled. It was there, making its way forward, stinging, biting, a sweet promise of power and pain, if only he released it.

Since when did he offer Harry anything?

Since when had it come to this — awkwardness, and curt remarks, and suppressing his thoughts; *restraining himself?*

‘I can’t pretend anymore,’ Harry repeated, but this voice was thicker now. ‘I can’t even trust you. I *don’t* trust you.’

‘And since when do you ever trust me?’ Tom snapped. ‘What’s changed, except you know about your stupid scar, and are having a stupid sappy crisis about things that will happen in the future. God, you’re such a *girl*.’

‘You’re crazy,’ Harry said. ‘I mean, you’re actually mad. You’re so arrogant that for some reason you can’t comprehend that this is over. We’re done.’

He looked wounded. Startled. Poised to bolt or attack or explode in a flurry of sparks.

Tom reached forward and Harry flinched back.

‘And *don’t* touch me.’

This was it then.

The fact that was starting to niggle at him more each day had now cracked open, split down the middle and burst. A week they hadn’t spoken. A week and Harry hadn’t come around. A week and *Tom* had made a disgusting apology while Harry watched him, his jaw set, his eyes dim.

‘I wasn’t going to touch you.’

It sounded thin even to Tom’s ears.

The disgusting organ in his chest was compressing. Tom bit down on his cheek to block out the truth. The horrible, mind-numbing truth: Harry was being serious. Harry was actually going ahead with his conflicted thoughts.

A laugh bubbled in Tom's throat.

'I'd you're going to go down this *holier-than-thou* route, you may as well fuck off to Gryffindor. Can't be hanging around with Abraxas anymore, can you? A Death-Eater like him, he'll inevitably end up serving me. And Belinda — '

Tom almost told him about Belinda.

Harry's face was stricken. He swallowed and took a step backwards. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. 'It's different with them. They're my friends, but you're —you're —'

'I'm what?'

'Forget it. I'm done pretending you're not Voldemort and your plans aren't to take over the world. And at the end of this year, you're going to go off and gather more Death Eaters, make more horcruxes. I'm not going to ignore it anymore.' He ran a hand across his face. 'And the fucking *horcrux*. I *am* going to get rid of it. And then you'll have no reason to obsess, and pretend —'

'Pretend what?'

'That it means anything!'

Tom bit down on his cheek again. He wanted to curse Harry, who was stupid and annoying and expected Tom to *say it.* Those patronising, meaningless words that wouldn't come forward, not without a flurry of insults.

'Well, why does it have to mean anything? Obviously, I like you and not just the horcrux.' He fell short. What did Harry want: Tom to beg?

'And?' Harry scoffed. 'You're going to become Voldemort. I'm not avoiding it anymore.'

'You did a fine job before.'

'Well, it's over. I mean — god. Have you really never gotten what you want before?'

Harry couldn't have known how the words itched at him. Tom thought of the orphanage and an ache in the pit of his stomach, so intense it made him hallucinate. Of Little Hangleton and the look on

his father's horrified, muggle face. Nights and nights staring at a ceiling scratched with drawings. The blackness of London. A longing so strong he could taste it. An emptiness that grew and grew.

'You can't change. Hell, you can't even compromise.'

'Why would I want to change? You've always known my plans.'

'Well, it's Voldemort or me. You can't have both.'

Tom's lip curled upwards. 'You think that's even a choice? It's Voldemort, obviously. Do you honestly think you compare? I mean, sure it was fun while it lasted but that's all. You're a *distraction*.'

And to think Tom would have offered him all.

'Well, good luck with those plans,' Harry said bitterly. 'I'm sure you'll be rotting in an Azkaban cell soon enough.'

Harry left without looking further at him, walking fast, his steps precise. When he had rounded the corner and disappeared, Tom exhaled through his nose. He waited in the silent hallway, temporary at a loss.

Two portraits were eyeing him curiously and when Tom glanced at them, they took it as a cue to speak.

'A lover's spat,' the man said knowingly. He had an enormous, gingery-brown moustache and wore a bottle-green suit. 'I've seen this happen a hundred times.'

His companion — a round-faced, blonde woman in a long satin dress — made a sympathetic clucking noise. 'You're better off without him, dear.'

Tom wanted to light them both on fire.

'I am better off without him,' he said instead, and turned to them, with an expression of false innocence. 'And Harry Potter can go and hang himself for all I care.'

They both gasped.

Tom set off down the corridor, his head high. Voldemort or Harry. It was simple, really. It always had been.

And if he had to shove away the hot sting of betrayal, the picture of

Harry's resigned face, and all the memories that burst forward like sparks, brilliant and horrible and all the things that were gone, then that was something he could do.

It was in the past now.

It had to be.

Harry walked around the castle slowly. It was already dark outside and the voices from the Great Hall drifted through the corridors. He stopped in the entrance hall, watching the warm light coming from beneath the doorway, lighting up a tiled strip of flooring.

Ron and Hermione would be in the hall, along with the other students who had stayed at Hogwarts for Christmas. But Harry couldn't stomach the thought of their concerned faces. Hermione would see right through his pretence and know at once he had been speaking to Tom.

Harry tore his eyes away from the warm light and made his way down the staircase.

There was no reason why it hurt so much; why it was so much worse than it had been with Ginny, worse than anything he had felt before. He couldn't escape the image of Tom's dazed face. It was burned into his memory: high cheeks, wide eyes, a mouth half-parted in shock. But not speaking. Never speaking.

He dodged the trick step, eyes adjusting to the greenish light. Maybe —just maybe—they would manage to avoid each other from now on.

(The ghost of a smile on Tom's face. Fingers tight around Harry's wrist. And the disarming way Tom looked at him — with such an intensity that Harry's stomach flipped; he became momentary useless).

''Oh, hi, Harry,' Abraxas said, rounding the corner. 'I didn't see you there.'

Harry descended the last step, shoving the thoughts away.

'Are you heading to the common room?' Abraxas continued, and when

Harry nodded, they fell into step.

Abraxas's blonde hair fell over his scalp, longer and untidier than Harry had ever seen it. His hands were shoved in his pockets and his tie was askew.

When they had walked for a few moments in silence, Harry asked him if he had heard from Belinda.

'Nothing.' Abraxas ran a hand through his hair, a habit that Harry had never seen him display before. 'She said she'd owl. Why hasn't she owled?'

'Maybe she hasn't had the opportunity to send a letter in private. But she said she will. We can only trust her.'

'You think she will?'

'Yes,' Harry said firmly. 'There's nothing you can do now except wait. She has a plan, doesn't see?'

'Yeah. A plan …'

They passed the potions store cupboard and the glass room which showed the inside of the lake. It was eerie now: the windows entirely black, a murky shape floating past.

'Tom looks pissed today,' Abraxas remarked. 'I mean he has since — you know—but I ran into him today, and …' he shuddered. 'It's not good. It was like being back in fifth-year.'

Harry's chest squeezed. 'I think he's finally realised that we're done.'

Abraxas slowed down and looked at him. 'It's different this time, isn't it? With you two?'

'It's *over* this time.'

'That's — that's … I'm sorry. If it makes you feel better, Tom's pretty upset. Or angry. It's hard to tell with him. But he's —*something.'*

'No offence,' Harry said, 'but I don't give a damn what Tom feels. He'll get over it.'

It probably wasn't even about Harry. It was all pride with Tom; all disbelief at not getting his own way.

And Harry couldn't blame him.

He wished he hadn't seen Tom now; wished they had never run into each other; never allowed things to blur and slide and become too much, too dangerous. It left him feeling achingly exposed. Tom couldn't care — and Harry knew it. It had manifested, nevertheless, and now it was an ache he couldn't quite get rid of, a line that had been crossed, never to be in undone.

Tom would love that, wouldn't he? How he had taken over Harry's mind. Implanted himself in his very soul.

'Sorry anyway,' Abraxas said. 'But it's probably best to end it now, before …'

'What? Before it means something? Gets even worse?'

They walked for a second in silence. Abraxas glanced at him from the corner of his eye, and then said, in a very careful voice, 'do you love him?'

'Do I —' Harry's heart hammered against his rib cage. He felt like he was going to stumble. Like he needed to get away quick. 'What the hell sort of a question is that?'

'Sorry,' Abraxas said. 'I didn't mean — I was just curious. You don't have to answer that, obviously.'

Do you love him?

Do you love him?

Do you love him?

'It's Tom,' Harry said, 'that's crazy.'

'Is it?'

'Yes, it's …'Harry licked his lips. 'It's a fucking joke, to be honest.'

They reached the Slytherin Common Room in silence. Abraxas didn't say anything else and for that Harry was grateful. The companionship was enough. Even unspoken, it felt like a load had left him. It was a burden he had carried for weeks, heavy, pressing, impossible to address.

He didn't. He couldn't. He did.

When they rounded the final corner, Harry took a breath. He forced his voice to stay casual, his eyes to fix on the grey wall ahead.

‘Don’t tell anyone, alright?’

Harry felt Abraxas’ eyes and looked over.

‘Of course not,’ Abraxas said, after a second of silence. He cleared his throat and looked at Harry quickly as if he was afraid of staring too much. ‘Do you want to study with me?’

‘Sure,’ Harry said and muttered the common room password. ‘Though not potions. I’d rather talk more about Tom than face potions today.’

Abraxas laughed and they stepped through the entrance.

‘Not potions,’ he agreed. The knot in Harry’s chest started to loosen. To ease. ‘I was actually thinking Defence.’

Gift Giving

‘It’s useless,’ Hermione said. ‘I mean, it’s really, really, really —' she shoved her hair out of her face. ‘Do they think I don’t know how to piece a soul back together? Obviously, that’s not going to work. It’s not like Tom Riddle can stick an extra piece onto his, or I don’t know, buy another locket and carry it around!’

Ron snorted and Harry shot him a wry grin.

‘I mean, it’s ...’ she blew out a breath. ‘It’s a killing curse, basilisk venom or fiendfyre. They’re our options.’

They had been in the library for hours. What had once been a tidy stack of books was now strewn all over the table, half-buried under parchment and quills. Harry had drunk three cups of coffee and yet his head still throbbed. Suppressing a yawn, Ron turned to him and said, ‘so do you want to be poisoned to death or burned alive? A killing curse probably won’t work on you. Not after the last one anyway.’

‘Oh, very funny,’ Harry said. ‘I think the poisoning sounds better. I’d probably lose consciousness before I really felt it.’

Ron nodded sagely. ‘Course I could always club you on the head with a beater’s bat and be done for.’

‘Ron! That’s not funny —'

‘Oh? And a killing curse is going to keep him alive? Have you heard yourself?’

As they bickered, Harry turned towards the window. Hagrid’s hut was a hazy blob of light in the distance, smeared and foggy through the damp windowpane. Above their table in the library, streams of holly twisted around the twinkling chandeliers.

‘We should visit Hagrid.’

Hermione and Ron stopped at once.

‘What,’ Ron began, a frown crossing his face. ‘You do realise we’d scare the living daylights out of him? What is he - fifteen?’

‘I know,’ Harry said, ‘but it’s Christmas and he’s probably lonely. And —' his heart started to sink —'he’s at *Hogwarts* for Christmas. That means his dad’s dead.’

Hermione blanched.

‘Wow, you’re a real bundle of joy,’ Ron said. ‘Any more depressing news to give us?’

Harry ignored him. ‘We can’t prove that he was framed,’ he said. ‘Not without concrete evidence. And let’s face it, they’ll never open that case again. But still, maybe we could just talk to him. Let him know we don’t think he’s a monster, or a freak, or that no one likes him ...’

Hermione’s eyes softened. ‘That’s a good idea, Harry,’ she said, already lifting her bundle of notes and opening her bag. ‘And anyway, it’s not really Christmas without Hagrid. I know he’s not our Hagrid, but maybe it’s time we get to know him. Otherwise, all those memories we have are meaningless.’

‘Yeah, or we completely terrify him,’ Ron said, ‘but then again, he is a half-giant. I’m sure he could take us if he really wanted to.’

Harry grinned.

He couldn’t quite explain it, not to Ron and Hermione, nor even to himself. But visiting Hagrid felt important. It was something he should have done sooner; something he couldn’t do, not with the knowledge of Tom and the future.

They made their way down the hill, clutching their cloaks against the wind. With the sun setting in the sky, they slipped on the grass several times, Ron swearing loudly and once—memorably — bringing Hermione down with him.

It was a shock to see Hagrid. He engulfed the doorframe, both taller and broader than he had seemed those months ago. His strikingly young face and smooth, full cheeks bore little resemblance to the man they knew, and his beetle-black eyes were wide with apprehension.

‘What are you doing here?’ he said, a quiver in his gruff voice. ‘Students aren’t meant to leave the castle.’

‘I know,’ Harry said. ‘We were wondering if we could come in for a chat.’

‘We’re new, remember?’ Ron said. ‘You found us in the forest. If it wasn’t for you ....’

Hagrid’s shoulders sagged slightly. ‘I did find you, didn’t I? Course the forest’s no place for strangers. Only Dumbledore trusts me in there ...’

‘We’re friends with Dumbledore too,’ Harry said and finally Hagrid pulled open the door.

It was awkward at first, as they stood in the sparsely furnished hut, trying not to seem too imposing. Harry’s eyes wandered around the threadbare furniture. He could see glimpses of the Hagrid he knew in the ramshackle space. A duck egg sat on the wooden table, and there was a leftover pumpkin from Halloween growing in an enormous tin pan.

But there were no hams hanging from the rafters, no crates of slug repellent and strings of unicorn hair. It was strikingly bare.

They sat at the wooden table, Hagrid very awkwardly, Hermione peppering him with questions on herbs and fungi and the best sorts of fertilisers to fill the silence. Gradually though, as she continued to look bright and curious and without a hint of pretence, Hagrid relaxed.

‘Comes down every evening, Dumbledore,’ Hagrid said. ‘Has since my old — since I came back. And says I can stay here as long as I want, help look after the grounds ...’

‘That’s great, Hagrid,’ Harry said. It was hard to look at him without his stomach plummeting. ‘Sorry we didn’t visit you sooner.’

‘You probably heard - probably heard the reason I, well —I had to leave, didn’t I?’ His hands trembled around his teacup, the liquid sloshing. ‘Suppose the reason doesn’t matter anymore.’

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ Harry said bluntly. ‘It wasn’t your fault at all. You didn’t open the Chamber of Secrets. And you didn’t kill Myrtle.’

Hagrid turned to him, eyes going wide, and Hermione aimed a swift kick at him under the table. ‘How’d you know that?’ Hagrid said.

‘It doesn’t matter. What matters is, we believe you. You’re not a murderer.’

Hagrid's lips began to wobble. 'Aragog wouldn't touch anyone,' he said, 'I told 'em. Said I had to be expelled anyway. Something about dangerous creatures and how Aragog was a monster all along.'

Hermione awkwardly patted Hagrid's arm. 'We know you're a good person,' she said. 'We don't believe those silly stories.'

'Yeah,' Ron agreed, 'you found us in the forest and took us back to the castle. We owe you for that one.'

'Blimey, I —' he cleared his throat. 'I don't know what to say. Wasn't expecting this. I —' he wrung his hands together, glancing at Hermione.

She smiled. 'Why don't you tell us what you do around here, Hagrid? Is there anything interesting in the forest?'

He brightened at once and the tension was broken. As they sat around the table, Hagrid told them about how he had found an injured bugbear on the outskirts of the forest, how the cabbage patches were wrought with horklumps, and how, while hastily offering them tea, Dumbledore had been very kind to let him train as groundskeeper.

'Great professor, Dumbledore,' he said, and Harry's heart seemed to stop for one long, wistful moment.

When they eventually left — Ron clapping Hagrid on the shoulder and telling him to look after himself — the sun had set. They lit their wands and made their way to the castle, listening to the wind whistle through the Forbidden Forest.

'He seems like a nice sort of kid,' Ron said. 'At least he has Dumbledore looking out for him.'

Hermione's teeth were chattering. 'Still, it's unfair the way he was expelled. They don't *care* if he did it or not, only that he's a half-giant. We could prove it was Riddle tomorrow morning and the ministry would laugh in our faces.'

Her wand light bobbed. 'It's even worse than it was in our time. I thought house-elves were discriminated against, but here every magical being is. And I really want to do something. Maybe in the ministry, though that would be difficult considering I'm a muggleborn. Even more difficult than before.'

‘You’ll do it, Hermione,’ Ron said, ‘first muggleborn minister of magic, I bet.’

Her laughter was snatched by the wind. ‘Anyway Harry, I’m glad you suggested we go and see Hagrid. That was kind of you.’

Harry thought it was the least he could do, considering Tom. The expulsion which could never be reversed. The fact they were too late and Myrtle was dead and the time-turner was broken and —

Harry breathed out deeply, his breath hanging in the air. ‘I wish I could fix it,’ he said, ‘and erase all of this. Go back. Let *you* go back —'

He’d do it in a heartbeat.

‘But we can’t,’ Hermione said. ‘The only thing we can do is make this mean something.’

‘There will be no war,’ Ron said suddenly.

‘Mum’s brothers don’t have to die. None of the Order, or the muggleborns, or muggles. Your parents, Harry. But I still wish — I still want…’

Their hair whipped around their faces as they reached the castle.

‘I know,’ Harry said quietly. ‘But Hermione’s right. We need to make lives here. Make it count for something.’

He could think of the future now without the suffocating sense of dread. Maybe it was because Tom was no longer part of it, or because there wasn’t a timer hanging over his head, an unspoken truth he couldn’t voice.

As the castle drew closer, the hundreds of windows flickered like candles. Harry turned to Ron and Hermione, whose features were just visible.

‘We’re okay, aren’t we? The three of us?’

He let the light die from his wand and stowed it in his pocket. The words hung between them and he shifted, feet freezing and shoes soaked through.

‘Of course we are,’ Ron said. ‘Now let’s get inside before it pours.’

Harry woke on Christmas morning to Abraxas yanking open his curtains and telling him to get up.

‘Bugger off,’ Harry immediately replied, putting a hand over his eyes and wincing at the onslaught of light. ‘What time is it?’

‘It’s Christmas, you git. Don’t you want to see what I got you?’

Harry squinted at the fuzzy blonde shape. ‘I don’t want anything. Sent it back.’

‘I’m *rich*. You should exploit it while you have the chance.’

Harry rolled his eyes and sat up. The dormitory was dark but the lamps were burning low and Abraxas had left the bathroom door open, sending a flood of bright light in. Rosier and Tom’s curtains were still pulled shut. Putting on his glasses and stifling a yawn, Harry got up.

‘Keep your voice down,’ he said, ‘I don’t want to wake …’ he glanced at Tom’s bed and Abraxas grimaced.

‘Right, of course. Here — open it.’

He thrust an elaborately wrapped present into Harry’s hands, complete with a silver bow on top.

‘Heavy,’ Harry observed, as Abraxas sat back on his bed and watched him raptly. Abraxas was still dressed in his pale blue pyjamas, his feet bare.

‘And rectangular.’

‘Open it!’

‘Right, right, I’m doing it.’ But as Harry carefully tore back the shiny paper, his smile slipped.

‘I know, I know. But you don’t have one and —’

Harry slowly raised his eyes. ‘You bought me a broomstick,’ he said slowly, ‘you… you actually … '

It was the exact same model that Alphard owned. The bristles were smooth, the mahogany handle polished. Harry’s mouth was dry. He cleared his throat. Stared.

‘Abraxas.’

‘You can’t use Orion’s broom forever, you know. And I thought — I knew you liked —' A hesitant look crossed Abraxas’ face and Harry smiled.

‘Thank you,’ he said, a lump the size of an apple in his throat. ‘Thank you so much.’

He knew now what it felt like to be Ron. Harry had never understood his friend’s aversion to presents before; the revulsion towards what Ron deemed ‘charity;’ the defensiveness. Harry had always been able to buy his friends whatever he wanted to and repay them without a second thought.

’’It’s my parents’ money,’ Abraxas said, as they stood in the quiet dorm, silver wrapping strewn around. ‘I should blow it all just to annoy the gits. And who knows, at this rate I’ll end up disinherited. I may as well spend it now.’

‘Still,’ Harry said, swallowing thickly. ‘You shouldn’t have bought me a broomstick. That’s expensive and crazy, and really, really —'he looked up—'kind of you.’

Harry ran his hands over the polished handle and traced the smooth curve in the wood. He held it up, marvelled at it, inspected the way it caught the light.

‘It’s only a broomstick,’ Abraxas said, though he was starting to look pleased with himself. ‘Really.’

Along with the broomstick, Harry received a box of Honeydukes Finest from Dumbledore, a book on Healing Charms from Hermione, and an enormous packet of sugar quills from Ron. Their presents were more in line with what Harry had been able to send. The three of them had scoured Hogsmeade the previous week, eventually deciding to get each other something small from the remains of their supply money.

When Harry saw the mound of wrapping paper on Abraxas’ bed, he was reminded so much of Draco Malfoy that he grinned. His friend’s presents were more elaborate than any Harry had seen before, and some of his guilt eased. Abraxas had tickets to the Quidditch World Cup, a signed Appleby Arrows poster, four new sets of robes and a collection of enormous leather-bound books.

‘It’s a bit of a competition in the family,’ Abraxas said, while tearing back the wrapping paper on a brand-new silver watch. ‘Everyone tries to outdo each other. Thank god I didn’t go home for Christmas this year. I only got mother a crockery set.’

‘What did your parents get you then?’

Abraxas scratched the back of his neck. ‘A ministry interview.’ He began tearing the wrapping paper into tiny pieces. ‘For the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.’

Harry blinked at him. ‘Well, that’s mean.’

‘Not really. Father wanted me in Magical Law Enforcement at first. And I do like magical creatures.’

Before Harry could tell him how irrational that was, Tom’s curtains opened.

At once, the sentence died in Harry’s throat. Beside him, Abraxas froze, the chocolate frog in his hands falling to the floor. No matter how much he wanted to look away, Harry couldn’t.

Tom’s hair was rumpled and his face was pale. There was a tightness around his jaw, a dullness to his eyes. Harry searched his expression — anything, anything, *anything* — but Tom glanced away from him dismissively.

‘Morning, Abraxas,’ he said. He nodded stiffly at Harry, barely sparing him a glance. Then he was past them, closing the door of the bathroom, and leaving the dormitory dark.

Harry and Abraxas looked at each other. Abraxas picked up the chocolate frog he had dropped on the floor and sat it on his bed.

‘Woah,’ Abraxas said. ‘He looked like he wanted to murder you.’

Harry thought the look on Tom’s face was worse than that. Careless. Irritated. Unfazed. It had been nothing to him.

‘I think,’ Abraxas began, ‘that maybe in his own way he’s upset. But with Tom —'

‘No way,’ Harry said shortly. ‘I can’t go back into that mess, not without —' he swallowed. ‘No. Never again.’

By the time lunch started, Harry managed to shove the interaction with Tom to the back of his mind. Ron had convinced him to play a game of chess, beating him so brutally that Harry's pawns cowered in shame and refused to do as he asked. They had eaten mounds of turkey and ham, followed by profiteroles and flaming Christmas pudding. As he sat with his friends, listening to Ron and Hermione argue about whether Hogwarts' food was better or worse than they remembered, Harry felt warm and tentatively hopeful. Maybe none of it was perfect or as he remembered. But it was Christmas and it was okay.

Before it got dark, he played Quidditch with Abraxas and Alphard, flying loops around the pitch on his new broom and marvelling at its fluidity. The wind whistled in his ears, followed by the whoops and shouts of Alphard, who could never quite fight his instincts as Quidditch Captain.

When they went back to the common room, however, wind-beaten and satisfied, Abraxas received a letter. The effects of it were visible on him at once: he paced restlessly up and down the carpet, wringing his hands together and snapping whenever Harry asked him what was wrong.

It didn't take long for them to figure out what had caused his abrupt change in demeanour. Half an hour later, a house-elf came through the portrait hole, bowing meekly, and carrying half a dozen copies of the daily prophet.

'Your evening mail, sirs,' the creature said, averting its eyes and wringing together its knobby fingers.

Abraxas lunged for the paper at once, while Harry and Alphard shared a look. There was never an evening prophet.

As the house-elf scurried away, Harry picked up a spare copy of the paper, skimming the flashing headlines. A jolt went through his stomach, sharp and static, and he turned to page nine.

Azkaban owner, Arnoldo Flint, found poisoned in his home after a heated dispute with Charles Lestrange. Evidence at the crime scene has seen Lestrange arrested and awaiting further investigation.

Harry's eyes ran down the page.

Sources reveal that the poison found in Flint's bloodstream was from the

Lestrange Apothecary and was discovered on the outskirts of the family property. It's known that Lestrange's close connection to Gellert Grindelwald has seen tensions increase, both in the ministry and at home.

Abraxas put down the newspaper and began to walk up and down the carpet. His hands were trembling. There was a sickly, triumphant expression on his face, as though he wanted to whoop but knew it wasn't quite appropriate.

'She got away with it,' he said, moving to stand beside Harry.

Harry closed the newspaper and sat it back on the pile. 'She murdered Arnoldo and framed her parents. What if they flee before the trial?'

'Doesn't matter,' Abraxas said. 'Belinda owled me and said her sister helped her plant the evidence before she got back from Hogwarts. It looks like her father and Flint have been arguing for a while—and let's face it, her family haven't been looking good these last few months. She's being allowed to look after her sister for now, and if everything goes well, she'll get custody. That's all Belinda wants.'

'As long as she doesn't get caught.'

But Belinda was wily. Sneaky, stoic, unpredictable. Whatever evidence she had would have been arranged meticulously. And the poison ...

'I guess she's okay,' Abraxas said shakily. 'Oh, thank *Merlin*.'

...it never would be traced back to her.

'Yeah,' Harry said. 'Thank god.' He looked at Abraxas from the corner of his eye, whose shoulders were sagging as he grinned, silly and relieved. 'Did you know she was going to kill him?'

The smile slid from Abraxas' face. 'No,' he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. 'But I mean ... at least ... at least she's free now, right?'

'Right,' Harry agreed and struck by the desire to move, raised from his chair. The relief and shock had not quite settled but nestled with them, becoming more prominent the longer he stood there, was a detached feeling of disgust.

Murder.

Not a struggle in the heat of the moment or the choice between life

and death.

Calculated. Planned.

Leaving her parents to spend the rest of their lives in Azkaban for a crime they didn't commit.

'He's really .... he's not a nice person,' Abraxas said. 'Or he wasn't.'

It's for my sister.

Harry sat back down. Abraxas was standing there awkwardly, an uncertain look on his face. He looked so *young*.

Harry thought of the war and the coldness it left. Quiet, yet definite, a decision that couldn't be taken back. Gone, dead, snuffed out, over. An eye for an eye, or was it, really?

He wondered if Belinda knew the cost.

In the boys' bathroom, steam rose in hazy clouds. Scents of pine and citrus hung in the humid air and clung to Harry's skin as he lay in the clawfoot bath. The water had long become tepid but instead of rising, Harry leaned forward and turned the brass tap, sending forward a flood of bubbles. A knot of tension was loosening in his shoulders and he sunk deeper into the water and closed his eyes.

The bathroom was still. Harry stretched out his hand and turned off the tap, letting the babble of water die away. He was submerged to his neck now, his hair starting to curl in his steam, his skin flushed from the heat.

Without the distractions of the day or the endless Christmas clamour, the thoughts in his mind no longer shrank away. Harry took his hand from the water and brushed back his hair. Unlike the rest of his forehead, the Horcrux was cold. It pulsed against the pad of his forefinger, a faint, broken rhythm that didn't quite match his heart. He had never noticed that irregularity before, never focused on it deeply enough.

The water around him swirled in a kaleidoscope of colours. There was a mosaic on the ceiling, where a mermaid basked in the setting sun, her scarlet tail glistening and her golden hair fanning about. She caught Harry's eye and blew him a kiss, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

He sunk deeper into the water.

He had never known about the horcrux before. Never felt the revulsion, the betrayal, the disgust that lingered like a bad taste in his mouth.

It had simply been part of him.

The ache in his body had eased now and his scar no longer prickled. Harry thought about Belinda and the blood on her hands. Tom, and whether he was in the common room or not; whether he cared about Harry, or ever had, even slightly. Harry wished he had.

He lathered some shampoo in his hair and then ducked under the water. When he surfaced, he absently swirled the bubbles around, watching the patterns they produced.

When he thought of the time before Tom, it was detached. The past was a miscellany of feelings and emotions and colours, all fuzzy and out of reach. Inspecting them too closely was like pressing his fingers into a bruise, bringing a dull pain he couldn't quite navigate the origin of.

It seemed like a century ago he had stepped into the maze. A decade since he had pined after Ginny Weasley, a lifetime since he'd seen Sirius' face. He couldn't fix it now, or go back, or even forget. He had to find a way to let go.

Maybe one day, Harry thought, watching the bubbles reflect the lights of the tiles, the days with Tom would seem like a different lifetime too. Maybe the memories would fade and blur until he couldn't quite pinpoint them, or know why they had meant so much. Harry didn't know if that thought was more comforting or depressing.

He summoned it now to his mind: painfully vivid, a technicolour blur that bloomed across his irises. Eating with Tom, laughing with Tom, wandering around the castle and talking for hours. Lying in the room of requirement with Tom, touching his skin, kissing his throat, marvelling at his delicately carved face. Groping in a musty broom-closet. Having sex.

Tom had been the best distraction of all. Intense, wild, all-consuming. Tom had made Harry forget all about his past. Within a matter of minutes, he could make Harry feel good, great, bring all his emotions

forward in a rush of colour. Tom had felt like the best thing that had happened in Harry's life. The only thing that ever mattered. And Harry had told Tom things he had never told anyone before. He had trusted Tom to keep his secrets, allowed Tom to know him in a way he didn't even show to Ron and Hermione. To sleep in his bed, to use his invisibility cloak.

Harry had let Tom *fuck him*. So why didn't he feel bad about it?

He found the plug in the bath and pulled it out. The water began to gurgle and soap suds clung to his skin. He watched it swirl down the drain and stood. His fingers were wrinkled from the water and his towel was nowhere in sight.

It should have scared him, the great force of his feelings, the effect Tom had on his life. He should have hated himself for it.

But he didn't.

Maybe this was acceptance, Harry thought. Or maybe he was just a sad, lovesick fool.

He padded around until he found the towel hanging on a radiator. The mermaid gave him an approving thumbs up and batted her eyes. When Harry grinned at her, she blew him another kiss and winked.

Harry was still warm from the water. He dressed slowly, straightening his tie and cleaning his foggy glasses. The thought of Tom overtook his mind but he knew fighting it was only futile. He couldn't repress it anymore; couldn't deny it either. Instead, resigned but surer than he had felt in weeks, Harry let the full force of the feeling overtake him.

The mermaid gave him another thumbs-up as he left the bathroom. Harry waved at her, a small smile on his face, and pulled open the door.

Half an hour later, he arrived outside Dumbledore's office. It took him a moment to guess the password — the door opened at *gingerbread* — before he was greeted with Dumbledore's surprised face.

'Harry! Come in, do come in. Did you have a nice Christmas?'

'It was good,' Harry said, stepping into the warm office. There were pink Christmas lights strewn over the bookshelves and a bowl of mince-pies sitting on Dumbledore's desk.

‘I do admit, I was going to eat them all myself - would you like one?’

But Harry shook his head. Dumbledore was wearing an elaborate blue robe and a nightcap that was decorated with Christmas trees. A real tree sat behind his desk, draped in tinsel and baubles, its branches hanging with pine cones and snow.

‘I came to apologise,’ Harry said, ‘for being so rude to you before. I was upset and I shouldn’t have taken my anger out on you. I’m sorry.’

‘That’s quite alright, my dear boy. I’m afraid you were right. The honesty you shared with me was not reciprocated. I should have told you my theories, however far-fetched I thought them to be.’

‘Still,’ Harry said, ‘I probably would have reacted the same way. But it wasn’t you who planned for me to die. It wasn’t your fault.’

Dumbledore waved a hand for Harry to sit down. ‘I can’t begin to speculate on how my alternate self made his choices. I’ve thought about it before and told myself that perhaps there was another way. A piece of information neither of us are aware of that would make sense of the mystery.’ He sighed. ‘Though that may be wishful thinking.’

Stroking the end of his auburn beard, he continued. 'I hope you know, Harry, that death is not the solution now. Tom Riddle is not Voldemort and the world we live in is not nearly as bleak as the one you remember.’

‘I still don’t like having it,’ Harry said. ‘It means I’m always tied to him and he always has something to obsess over.’

A tiny frown crossed Dumbledore’s face and Harry wondered if he knew that things were over with Tom.

‘Would you rather die,’ Dumbledore said, ‘than have a connection with Mr Riddle?’

Harry’s eyebrows shot up. ‘No, but now that I know what it is ... ‘he shook his head. ‘It doesn’t matter. I’m not here about the Horcrux. I actually have something for you.’

He reached into his pocket and wordlessly held out the Resurrection Stone.

Dumbledore was quiet for a moment. He made a funny image sitting

there, half-moon glasses slipping down his long nose, mouth agape in dumbfound surprise.

‘I can’t possibly accept this.’

Harry resisted the urge to retract his hand, curl his fingers around the stone and stuff it back in his pocket where it belonged. Instead, he took a deep breath.

‘It doesn’t work for me. My dead don’t exist here. They’re not, well, *dead*. Or living either.’

Both of them looked at the stone.

‘Take it,’ Harry said, ‘or I’ll toss it in the forest because I can’t cling onto it anymore. I can’t.’

He traced his fingers over the cold surface one more time. ‘You can see your sister. Talk to her, tell her all the things you never got the chance to. I can’t do that with my parents.’

Dumbledore was silent for so long that Harry wondered if he had made a terrible mistake. But when he looked up, Dumbledore’s eyes were bright with tears.

‘Thank you, Harry,’ he said, ‘you have no idea what this means to me. Do you mind if I take it?’

‘No,’ Harry said, though the words caught in his throat. ‘Please. I don’t want it anymore.’

When he took the stone from Harry’s hand — very carefully, as though afraid it would crumble — Harry had to turn away. The raw expression on Dumbledore’s face was so striking that Harry felt like an intruder.

Letting go of the stone felt like giving up. It was letting go of something else: a hope he clung to, a tie to the past, forever gone. Yet as he looked at Dumbledore, Harry knew it was the right thing to do.

After a long moment where neither of them said anything, Dumbledore cleared his throat. ‘I believe this belongs to you.’

Harry, who had been finding the floor remarkably interesting those past few moments, glanced up. ‘I can’t —' he said, his throat going dry. ‘You should disarm me. That way ...’

But Dumbledore was shaking his head. The Elder Wand sat on the desktop between them. Dumbledore leaned back and pushed it towards Harry.

‘Once, I would have rejoiced at the thought of possessing two Deathly Hallows. But after seeing the devastation they have caused and the effects of my actions in your time, I no longer think it wise. The wand has not been working well for me ever since that day in my office. Now it has stopped completely. It’s much safer in your hands, Harry, and I have a fine wand. Holding onto that one is only reminding myself of an old dream — one I should never chase after.’

‘I know,’ Harry said, ‘I’m sorry, sir.’ He raised his hand and the wand shot towards him. When it collided with his palm, a mass of dark tendrils shot from the end, twisting towards the ceiling and out of sight. A jolt like electricity went through Harry’s arm, and the room grew colder. He raised the wand, felt something flood him — cold, feather-light, natural — and smiled.

‘There we go,’ Dumbledore said quietly. ‘I believe you possess all three now, is that correct?’ ‘That’s right.’

‘There’s no one else I would trust with them more.’

Putting the Elder Wand in his pocket, Harry stood. It was dark out the window and beginning to snow. Dumbledore was carefully inspecting the Resurrection Stone with his wand, a look of great wonder on his face.

Harry paused in the doorway for a moment, staring around the warm office.
‘Merry Christmas, sir,’ he said and slipped out into the hall to give Dumbledore a moment of privacy.

In an empty classroom, Harry held his breath. The Elder Wand was between his fingers, his own sitting on a nearby desk. He had locked the door on his way in and dimmed the lights. Through the long windows was the glow of the moon.
Harry could feel it. Like a whisper of Parseltongue. A faint breeze. He raised the wand slowly and sent it swishing through the dusty air.
Lumos.

The torches overhead burst to life. The chandelier tipped and then steadied, flames sparking. Harry raised the wand again and focused on

pouring his magic into it. It was cold in his hand, and he couldn't decide if the feeling was pleasant or not.

Expelliarmus.

The light that came from the wand was not red. The same mass of black shadows he had seen in Dumbledore's office, the same ones that had swooped and darted after Rosier, shot from the end. The wand vibrated - another shadow, a thick, flickering mass, and Harry's hands shook. He felt the magic flood the room, heavy and expectant.

Accio, he thought, *accio duster.*

The shield he threw up was without thought.

Every object in the room launched towards him. Twenty tables, chairs, and all the trinkets that littered the professor's desk. They bounced off the shield and hung in the air: chalk, rolls of parchment, a poinsettia that was spilling from its pot.

Harry's heart thundered.

The magic lingered in the room. Shadows were ready to twist and comply; to satiate whatever thought came into his head. It was power he had never felt before, compliance at his fingertips. He knew why Dumbledore had called it dangerous.

Settle, he thought. *Finite incantatem.*

The objects dropped with a crash.

Setting down the Elder Wand, Harry shook out his hand and inspected the room. The aftershock of the spell hung in the air and his fingers tingled. He picked up his own wand, warm, comfortable and familiar, and levitated everything back into its original position.

The surge of adrenaline had not yet died. Harry's heart raced with excitement. He picked up the Elder Wand again.

He could almost feel it.

A whisper of shadows, beckoning, promising. His to control. His to guard. To explore and unlock and discover. Not Tom's, not Dumbledore's, not this.

It was all *Harry's*.

A Matter of Pride

The Christmas holidays were not quite over when Harry and Abraxas spotted Belinda entering the castle. They barely had a moment to glimpse her white-blonde head before she was ushered into Headmaster Dipper's office by Slughorn.

Half an hour of intense speculation followed. Abraxas, raking his hands through his hair and stomping around the common room, grew more and more impatient as the minutes passed. 'Do you think they suspect her?' he asked Harry for the hundredth time, checking his shiny new watch. 'Or me? What's taking so long?'

When Belinda finally did enter the common room, both he and Harry were up in a flash.

'What happened?' Abraxas asked at once. 'Are you alright? Are they being convicted?'

Harry studied Belinda carefully. She was dressed in a thick winter cloak, with a satin shawl draped over her shoulders. Her hair was loose and tousled from the wind and her expression was impossible to decipher.

'They were going to leave,' she said. 'Right after Christmas. Mother, father, Claudia, the whole lot of them. I didn't have a choice.' She flung herself into the nearest armchair, kicking off her shoes.

'I owled the ministry after I did it. I pretended I was scared and told them how I suspected they were fleeing the country. Father and Flint had gotten into an awful argument a few nights before and father was so *angry* about Grindelwald being imprisoned that I feared what he would do.'

She looked away from Harry. 'So, I gave them the location of our house and they appeared in minutes. They hate him in the ministry. When they found — when they found Flint, they took them both in at once. It's not looking good for mother either.'

Abraxas' eyes were wide. 'What about you?' he said, his throat working. 'Do your parents know it was you?'

'Of course.' She shrugged. 'But if anything, it just makes them seem crazier. There's no evidence. Father has a lot of letters from

Grindelwald and I had Claudia hide them in his study — along with some other things. She's nine, so they can't use Veritaserum on her.'

'Well, weren't you questioned?' Harry said.

Belinda's eyes darted to him and then away. She seemed unable to look at him, despite the impassive expression she wore. 'Claudia planted everything, not me. But they didn't ask me very much, only if I thought my father would do such a thing, if he had ever been violent in the past, if mother knew …'

She chewed her lip. 'And my memories add up. I guess that old engagement ring came in handy, huh?' She held out her finger, showing off the ugly stone.

Harry thought of how easily Tom had framed Hagrid and how disgusted Hermione would be if she could hear about the corruption in the ministry. *They wanted Belinda's parents imprisoned,* he thought, *and now they have their opportunity.*

'What will you do if your parents go to Azkaban?'

'I'll get custody of Claudia. She can stay with Aunt Aubrey until I finish Hogwarts — she's a spiteful old hag but fairly harmless. Then I'll look after her. Send her to Hogwarts and whatever.' She twisted her ring around her finger, looking down at the floor.

'What about your life after Hogwarts?' Abraxas said. 'Claudia's not going to Hogwarts for a couple of years. Unless she lives with your aunt —'

'No,' Belinda said. 'No way. *I'll* look after her. I don't give a shit about my life after Hogwarts.' She brushed her hair back from her face, suddenly fierce.

Harry shifted from foot to foot and then said, 'so you killed him?'

Belinda's eyes snapped towards him. 'I knew you wouldn't approve but I did what I had to. And if you knew even half of what I do about my family, you'd do it too.'

'I know,' Harry said. 'You were running out of options. I don't think you had to resort to murder but —'

'I didn't have a choice. They were leaving. I was marrying him — that twisted, twisted *fuck* and — 'her voice wavered and she turned away.

‘Whatever, Harry. I may have had other options but that was the only effective one.’

At the sight of her shattered face, he nodded. ‘I don’t blame you. I’m really glad you’re okay.’

Belinda sniffed. ‘I should be,’ she said, ‘as long as I didn’t forget anything.’ She stood up, stepped into the light, the dark circles under her eyes coming into focus.

‘You can’t think about that now,’ Harry said. ‘You can’t even consider it. It’s over and it’s done and whatever happens, you can twist it back to your parents. There’s enough evidence for the ministry to stop looking.’

Belinda exhaled slowly. ‘Yes,’ she repeated, in the same flat, hollow voice that had unnerved Harry earlier. ‘If I did everything right there is.’

They looked at each other for a minute and then Abraxas stepped forward. ‘I’m so glad you’re okay,’ he said quietly, wrapping his arms around her. ‘Thank *god*. You don’t know how scared I was. I thought … I …’

Belinda froze in Abraxas’ arms before awkwardly patting him on the shoulder. She made a soft, soothing noise — *it’s okay, it’s okay* — while Harry stared down at the green carpet, not wanting to see Abraxas cry, not wanting to watch, to invade.

‘Let’s go and get something to eat,’ Belinda said then. She cleared her throat. Abraxas had stepped away but was still watching her as if afraid she would disappear.

‘Slughorn’s been pestering me all morning and I’ve been getting weird looks all over the castle.’ She forced a smile. ‘Anyway, all this stress has worked up an appetite.’

Harry didn’t cling to Belinda the way Abraxas did, though he did keep a close eye on her. He watched her at meals and made sure she did more than toss her food around her plate. When the common room would go quiet, Harry suggested ways they kept busy. In the mornings

when the owls swept in, the three of them would hold their breath, only releasing it after combing through the prophet and finding no news. He knew what it was like to be consumed by apprehension; knew how irritating the constant smothering could become, well-intentioned or not.

When he wasn't with Belinda or Abraxas, Harry spent his time with Ron and Hermione. It was almost normal again between them, and with the students home for Christmas, the house divide didn't seem so apparent. Afraid to break the newfound ease, it took Harry two days to reveal his possession of the Elder Wand.

They were in the Room of Requirement when he mentioned it. Hermione was making a study timetable, while Ron sprawled on the sofa beside her, leafing through a Quidditch magazine. Across from them, taking a moment to capture the image in his mind—the lazy ease on Ron's face, Hermione's rosy cheeks and ink-smeared fingers—Harry cleared his throat.

'I gave Dumbledore the Resurrection Stone,' he said, leaning back against the leather armchair.

Ron put down his Quidditch magazine and Hermione straightened up.

'Really?' Ron said, sharing a quick look with Hermione. 'Are you sure he's safe to have that? He might get tempted to go after the Hallows again.'

'I thought that,' Harry said, 'but after everything that happened with Grindelwald, I don't think he will. And a few weeks ago, I accidentally disarmed him.' He held up a hand at Hermione's flummoxed expression. 'It was *accidental*. I was upset. But the Elder Wand doesn't work for him anymore. It's mine.'

He stuffed his hands into his pockets.

'All the Hallows are.'

They took a second to absorb this information. Ron jumped up.

'You're a git! Where is it then?'

'Where's *what?'*

'The Elder Wand! Or did you toss that away too?'

‘No, I—’ Harry laughed at the look on Ron’s face. ‘Here it is.’ He handed it over easily but Ron flinched as though he had stuck his hand into a flame.

‘It feels cold,’ he said, holding it at an awkward angle and marvelling still. ‘Weird.’

‘Just as you’d expect using Dumbledore’s wand would feel like then.’

‘It’s not Dumbledore’s, it’s yours,’ Hermione said. When Ron handed it to her, she grimaced. ‘It has a sort of restless energy, I think. Not quite dark but … it’s charged. Ready to cast.’ She inspected the wand from all angles and handed it back.

‘How does it feel for you?’

‘Different.’ Harry ran his finger along the wood. ‘Not good or bad, just unfamiliar. And you’re right about it being charged. I can’t really control it unless I concentrate. Everything comes out overpowered.’

‘You probably need to get used to it,’ Ron said. ‘It’s the *Elder Wand.* Ooh, we should duel and I’ll try to beat you — it never loses, right?’

‘Well, that’s not true,’ Hermione said. ‘Remember Dumbledore and Grindelwald?’

Harry smirked. ‘I’d like to see you try and win anyway.’

‘Prat. For all you know, I’ve been practising.’

‘I’ll let you fire the first curse —'

Hermione cleared her throat. ‘I don’t think trying to disarm Harry’s wise. Didn't you say you can’t control the wand yet? And since you have all three, you’re the master of death. *You’re the master of death.* What does that mean?’

‘I can’t die?’ Harry winced at the thought. ‘No, that doesn’t seem right. I think it’s just a title.’

‘Just a title?’ Ron snorted. ‘Like it’s just a children’s story?’

‘Well, I haven’t started bringing things back to life with my mind yet, but if I do, I’ll let you know.’

They mulled it over for a moment. Ron wanted to touch the wand

again but this time it burned him. Hermione settled back in the chair, twisting her hair around her finger.

'Riddle wants the wand,' she said slowly. 'Does he know about it?'

Harry's smile faded. *Tom*, he thought, and his insides felt like they were shrinking. 'I don't use it around anyone,' he said. 'And it's not like we speak anymore. He doesn't have to find out.'

'Good,' she said. 'He'd probably steal it. And if he had that —' she shivered. 'Well, it would make things even more complicated around here.'

Harry swallowed. He knew Hermione was right. It would lead to another *obsession*. Another thing that would feel painfully real —that would mean nothing to Tom and everything to Harry.

'If he finds out about the wand, I'll snap it in half,' Harry said. 'Rather than let him take it.'

He knows about your cloak. He knows about your cloak and you let him wear it. He probably knows about the stone too. And if he finds out …

'We should try the wand on the time-turner,' Ron said suddenly.

Harry and Hermione both blinked at him.

'Yes,' Hermione said, her voice quavering. 'Yes, that's a wonderful idea. I'll get it right now — stay there.'

She had barely left the Room of Requirement before she was back, panting, and holding the shattered pocket-watch in her hands.

'Here,' she said breathlessly, thrusting it towards Harry. 'Try it.'

He looked at the time-turner warily. There was a strange sensation in his chest, as though everything had frozen. Ron and Hermione's faces were alight with expectancy, and Harry couldn't do it, not shatter them again.

'Reparo,' he said softly, pointing the Elder Wand at the frozen clock face. A jolt of magic spread through his hand. The tips of his fingers tingled. And he felt the magic pour towards the watch — he wanted, more than he had wanted anything in his life, for those tiny hands to move. But the minute the magic hit the watch, it bounced backwards, as if meeting a shield. The spell hit Harry in the face and light

exploded before his eyes.

‘Harry!’ Hermione said. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Fine,’ Harry said, clutching his nose. Her shape was fuzzy. ‘It stings.’

But then she was murmuring something under her breath and the pain disappeared.

‘Told you I couldn’t control it,’ Harry said. There was blood all over his fingers and robes. His nose was hot. He picked up the time-turner and touched the broken face.

‘It didn’t work,’ he said slowly. ‘The Elder Wand didn’t work.’

It was impossible to look at them then. Harry cast another spell with the wand, and another, until finally Hermione told him to stop. There was a tremor in her voice and the Room of Requirement was blurring around them, unable to retain a shape.

I’m sorry, Harry thought, but he knew they didn’t want to hear it. Instead, he handed the time-turner back to Hermione.

‘I guess that’s it then,’ Ron said, sounding oddly calm. ‘We’re stuck here. That thing isn’t magical anymore.’

They sat in silence for a moment, stale and finalising. Harry conjured some tissues to mop up his nose and Hermione turned the time-turner over in her hands before putting it back in her pocket. Without a word, Ron snatched up his Quidditch magazine and stretched his legs out on the sofa. Every couple of moments, the sound of turning pages broke the stillness.

Harry kept the Elder Wand at the bottom of his trunk and only took it out in the Room of Requirement. With the stone walls and dummies and shelves upon shelves of tomes, Harry forgot about Tom. The thoughts of him had become something akin to a toothache: dull and persistent throughout the day, though no longer festering.

Harry spent hours exploring his magic. He cast spells until he was spent, sweaty; until he trudged back to the dorm and fell asleep with only the prickle of his scar. The wand was starting to feel more

natural now. It cast with a speed that was exhilarating; a rush of power that eased the ache in his head. There was something exciting about owning it: something new and untapped and entirely *his*.

In the drawn-out hours of the Christmas holidays, Harry pored over books. Belinda had given him a collection to borrow — *Magics Most Macabre*— and he researched horcruxes and dark magic for hours. He followed the study timetable Hermione made him. It was a distraction from Tom, the emptiness of the common room, and only when the pages began to blur and the words slid away did Harry go back to the dungeons.

When he was exhausted, Harry didn't think of Tom before he fell asleep. He didn't listen to him move about the dorm, didn't obsess over the sound of his breathing, the memory of his skin, his mouth. The proximity wasn't so unbearable when Harry could barely lift his head. And despite it all, despite everything —

It would be so easy to go back to the way things were.

Three days after giving him the resurrection stone, Harry was stopped by Dumbledore in the corridor. Ron and Hermione were by Harry's side, bags slung over their shoulders. Hermione wore a long scarlet scarf and had her nails painted in festive colours. When she spotted Dumbledore, her chatter died at once.

'Professor,' she said, instantly polite. 'How are the holidays treating you?'

They made small talk for a few moments —the snow was clearing up, Professor Flitwick told the most amusing story about the Hog's Head — before Dumbledore turned to Harry.

'How is your new artefact?'

'It's good,' Harry said and smiled. 'What about the—er—Christmas present I gave you?'

Dumbledore beamed. 'Rest assured, it works perfectly. Though I'm afraid I must give it back —Ariana and I had a good talk, and holding on would only be wishful thinking.'

Harry's eyebrows shot upwards. 'You don't want to keep it?'

'I don't think that would be wise. It's the Hallow I wanted most dearly to have in my possession but alas, the dead and the living exist in

different worlds and lingering between them is no more living than staring into the Mirror of Erised. Have you heard of it?'

Harry and Ron shared a look.

'Vividly,' Ron said, and Dumbledore was placing the stone back into Harry's hand and smiling, in a light, carefree way that seemed to lift the years from his face. 'Thank you, Harry,' he said, 'you have given me something I never hoped to achieve. Closure and the ability to finally move forward. I only hope that one day you'll be able to do the same.'

As he moved down the corridor, velvet robes swishing, long auburn hair catching the sun, Ron cleared his throat and said, 'bit surprising, coming from him. Suppose after knowing all the shit he sent us through, he'll stay away from Hallows from now on.'

'Yeah,' Harry said. The stone was a weight in his hands — a weight he had gotten rid of and hadn't expected back. He turned it over thoughtfully, uselessly, heart thumping.

'I'll keep it,' Ron said. 'Always wanted one of these things.'

And just like that, Harry could breathe.

'Alright,' he said, handing it over. 'I didn't know you were such a big fan of stones or I would have got you a few for Christmas. Do they have to be black or are you not picky?'

'Oh, ha, ha,' Ron said, pocketing it. And as they made their way down the hall, all thoughts of Dumbledore drifted into wonderful, meaningless conversation.

On his eighteenth birthday, Tom read a book about potion-making in the fourteenth century. He sat in the common room, the green lights flickering, and dared anyone to bother him. He had received an array of presents in the post from the Death-Eaters; opulent, lavish things, a means of boasting their wealth, of worshipping the only way they knew how. Professor Slughorn had invited Tom into his office for a drink but Tom, whose head was throbbing from all the reading, quickly declined. And Harry — who had darted in and out of the day,

always in the corner of Tom's peripheral - hadn't so much as acknowledged him.

Had the holidays always been such a bore?

Before, the emptiness of the castle had been freeing. Now, everything was bland, muted, stained by *what it could have been.* The knowledge that it was all Harry's doing was sour.

Harry was always there, too close, too frustrating, too far away. Tom wanted to throw his wand aside and punch Harry in the face until his knuckles burned with the satisfaction of it. He wanted to watch his head snap back, his eyes widen, his lip split. A great staggered punch that finally, finally expressed the savage energy Tom had inside.

Instead, he did nothing. It was *over*. And caring about Harry — to want him to beg, to plead, to *die* — only echoed the ugly truth.

It never should have become like this.

With January the snow cleared up, the students came back and the holly and tinsel were taken down. Tom observed Harry passively. He watched him troop down to Hagrid's hut with Weasley and Granger in the fading light, Harry's back turned, his hair inky black, the picture blurry through the stained windows. And how, Tom though –slumping against a shelf, his jaw clenched—was he obsessed with *that?*

Harry was the antithesis of everything Tom believed in. It was a joke and yet his stomach twisted. Heat, desire, a longing so sharp it felt like a cramp. Harry would never look at Tom in that tender, silly way he reserved for his friends. He would never perk up, never grin, never drop everything for Tom's company. He wasn't *Tom's.*

And yet — if only —

It didn't matter.

The mood shifted in the house when the Slytherins came back. Tom couldn't be bothered by their antics anymore. By the incessant chatter, the firing questions, the floods of thoughtless praise. Didn't they realise he was angry? That he no longer cared? That his head *hurt?*

In the common room, Tom avoided all of them by pretending to read. The fire was slowly dying in the grate and Walburga was making eyes at him across the common room. Ever since the Slytherins had come back, ever since it was clear he and Harry no longer spoke, Walburga was all sympathy and adoration.

Did she think they were back in *fourth-year*? Tom stared into the fireplace, ignoring the noise around him.

'Did you hear what Slughorn said? About that opening in the ministry?'

If Harry were here, he'd never mention an opening in the ministry. He would know Tom was still stinging over the Defence rejection, still ripping into it and letting it scab over, again and again.
Harry *knew* Tom, in a way that no one else did.

'He really wants you, Tom,' Avery said loudly, 'weren't you talking to Selwyn at the last party?'

'And of course, you'll always have us. I don't wanna brag but my mother was talking about me taking over from her in the Floo Department …'

A jolt like electricity went through Tom at the words. *You'll always have us.* He turned around, closing the book with a snap. Avery's shoes were off and his big toe was poking through a hole in his sock. He had picked at an enormous pimple on his chin and it glared red.

A dozen faces watched Tom, eager, nervous, buzzing with energy. There was the vestige of a smile on Fergus' face. Lucretia seemed to be holding her breath.

Avery straightened up on the chair, dropping his feet to the floor. 'Excuse me,' he said, licking his lips, 'm'lord, but don't you think we should do something about Potter?'

'Potter?'

Say it. I dare you.

Walburga leaned forward in her seat, crossing her ankles together. There was an intake of breath. A hush.

Avery fumbled and then said, 'yeah, Potter. He's a traitor, isn't he? Yet he's still strutting around, hanging out with bloody *Albus*

Dumbledore, and all those Gryffindors, and, and —'

Tom turned to Abraxas' waxy face; Belinda's averted eyes.

'—He just gets away with it. With anything he wants, and now he's betrayed *you* and—' Avery was practically trembling as the words came, quick and fast, with no time for second-guessing. 'He doesn't fit in here anymore. He doesn't even try to pretend.'

'What exactly do you suggest, Harold?'

'You should torture him. Punish him. You should let me — let me — '

Tom's lips quirked. *'Yes?'*

'I'll …' he hesitated. *'We'll* do it. If you want.'

Coward.

'What about you, Edwin?' Tom said. 'Any suggestions? Murder? Mutilation? Should we send him back to Gryffindor?'

Edwin's Adam's apple jutted in his throat. 'No, my Lord. Whatever you want.'

Tom wanted the entire house to disappear. He wanted to press his fingers against Harry's jugular —the burn of skin, the staccato beats of heart—leaving him powerless beneath his hands. Sink his teeth into the scar on his forehead, fuck him until he cried, kiss him *one more time*. He wanted Harry to look at him the way he looked at Granger, all soft and affectionate and sweet.

To do anything except exist in that bloody house and no longer be *Tom's*.

'What I want?' Tom said slowly. 'I don't particularly care what happens to Harry Potter now. Like you said, he's not a true Slytherin.'

'Well, doesn't he need to be punished?' Avery's eyebrows knitted. 'Are you just going to *leave him?'*

Tom shrugged. 'Perhaps. I don't particularly care if Harry Potter wants to pine after Gryffindor House. Isn't being stuck here punishment enough?'

(And press his head into the crook of Harry's neck. Trace his finger over the veins in his arms, count the freckles on his nose).

‘Well, what about—’ Avery hesitated. He wouldn’t say it. Never. ‘You really don’t care what he does?’

‘I don’t care *at all.* He’s nothing. Harry Potter can move into Gryffindor for all I care.’

Tom stared vacantly into the fireplace. A few weeks ago, he had sucked Harry’s *cock* because he wanted to watch his reaction. He had debased himself on his knees, and for what? That wide-eyed, incredulous expression on Harry’s face? The *noises* he made? Or the careful —so very careful —way that he touched Tom in response, fingers trembling, holding his breath, scared of making a wrong move?

‘Well, I hate him,’ Avery said. ‘Anyone who hangs around with Dumbledore — who supports that muggle-loving bastard — is a complete waste of space.’

‘He isn’t even that good at Quidditch,’ Walburga said. Her dark eyes were on Tom.

Abraxas opened his mouth and then paused, swallowing the words back.

Tom didn’t respond.

‘If we lose the cup, it’ll be Potter’s fault,’ Nott said. ‘Then I’ll really kill him.’

‘He thinks because his family were killed by Grindelwald that he’s better than all of us. With all his *trauma* —'

‘And his friends,’ Avery said. ‘There’s something weird going on there. I bet they’re all fucking.’

A muscle popped in Tom’s jaw. Abraxas glanced over at him, but whatever he saw on Tom’s face made him hesitate.

‘Why else keep Granger around? They probably take turns with her. He’s such a blood-traitor too. But you’re friends with him, aren’t you, Abraxas?’ Avery turned to him, his lip curling.

‘Yeah,’ Abraxas replied. ‘So what? Alphard likes him as well.’

Alphard shifted uncomfortably at the attention but didn’t deny it.

Nostrils flaying, Avery turned. ‘Come on, Edwin. You’re the one who

said it all along. Potter's not a real Slytherin and you know it.'

Edwin, however, looking almost as awkward as Alphard did, averted his gaze. 'I don't want to talk about what Potter is or isn't anymore.'

'What, did you *bond* over Christmas?'

He laughed but Rosier didn't answer.

'I think Potter's the worst thing that has ever happened to Hogwarts,' Walburga said. 'It's a shame he didn't die along with the rest of his blood traitor family.'

Tom turned to her. 'What was that one?'

There was a deathly silence. Tom's tone was light, bored, but with an edge he was unable to conceal. All of them heard it. Walburga scrambled upwards, the colour draining from her face.

'Nothing,' she said quickly, 'my lord. I didn't mean …'

'Forget it,' Tom snapped. He wanted, all at once, for them to disappear.

The Slytherins regarded him warily and Tom bit the inside of his cheek, knowing his tone had been too revealing. But he couldn't take the words back. Without sparing the Death Eaters another look, he stood.

'I have a matter to attend to,' he found himself saying, so venomously that Walburga swallowed. Tom's eyes swept towards Avery, who shrank back. On the coffee table, a cup started to rattle, the sound punctuating the hush.

Tom swept out of the common room, trembling with the effort to contain his magic. The air was suffocatingly thick. He squeezed his eyes shut and dropped the act, exhaling for what seemed like the first time all day.

Why did he have to *care?*

'Nasty thing, breakups,' Slughorn said. 'I knew at once when I saw it.

Horrible, horrible business …'

In Professor Slughorn's office, Tom sat with his feet resting on a footstool. He had a mug in his hands, but the tea was already cold, and he couldn't be bothered heating it. The simple act — of flicking his wrist, of thinking the incantation — proved too much effort. The sky was dark out the window and Tom had watched it change: pale blue, pink, streaks of scarlet and sapphire. Now, heavy and purple, clouds hung like bruises. He shifted in his seat and turned away.

'…and you sit with him in potions,' Slughorn continued. Tom could smell the sherry on his breath as he leaned forward, arms moving. 'I could change up the seating plan if you wish. Pair Harry with Abraxas? The two of them get along well.'

Tom sat down his cup. 'No, sir,' he said at once. 'He'd know I asked you to and I don't care where Harry sits. It doesn't bother me.'

Slughorn chortled. 'Oh, the pride of youth. It's a fine thing, indeed.' His moustache quivered. 'Are you sure?'

'Positive,' Tom replied. He hadn't mentioned his falling out with Harry but it seemed to be the only thing Professor Slughorn wanted to talk about. From the moment Tom had entered the office, Slughorn was bemoaning their 'strained relationship.'

'Anyway, I hope you manage to patch things up. Though I can only begin to speculate on the cause, it's a damn shame indeed.'

Tom shrugged noncommittally. 'I don't want to patch things up.'

'You don't?' Slughorn frowned, leaning forward. 'Why on earth not, my dear boy?'

A clock was ticking on Professor Slughorn's desk. He had a picture of the Slug Club framed on the wall, all stiff smiles and straight backs.

Tom stretched out his legs.

'I suppose,' he said, finishing his drink, leaning back. 'I suppose it's because I hate him.'

Halfway through January, Tom was used to avoiding Harry. It had become routine by then, one he had perfected. They'd occasionally stumble upon each other in the bathrooms (Tom would perform an automatic nod; Harry would look like he had been force-fed poison). At meals, they didn't sit near each other, not without Abraxas, or Belinda, or whoever could fill up the silence (eating slow and mechanical, occasionally catching each other's eye, glancing away). It was easy to sit on opposite sides of the common room, even easier when Harry spent most of his time with Weasley and Granger. They worked in silence in potions, occasionally punctuated by a request like *'can you pass me the knife?'*

Tom's anger had dulled, settled into a sort of resignation. It wasn't about the Horcrux. It wasn't about anything in particular, except choosing between Voldemort and Harry. It had just … ended. And yet, the pervasive longing hadn't disappeared.

They didn't speak but Tom had taken to watching Harry obsessively.

They didn't speak but he would feel the silence between them in potions, burning, choking, thick and static.

See Harry with Abraxas and be struck with that hot feeling of jealousy; a feeling so overwhelming all other thoughts disappeared. Tom never should have let it come to this. Because now — now he knew what it was like to have both, to have *Harry* — letting go felt like cutting off one of his hands.

The weeks bled together. To fill up the sudden absence in his life, Tom did things with the Death Eaters. But everything he wanted to achieve at Hogwarts had fallen into place in fifth-year, and now —when he wasn't in the chamber or the library or performing Head Boy duties — Tom watched Harry. His eyes would slide when Harry was talking to Abraxas. (A quickening of pulse. He wanted to slam Harry's head against a wall and drag him to the dorm by his hair). Watching Harry eat his meals. (Kiss him until he couldn't speak. Sink his teeth into his *heart)*. His hands moving in classes *(I must not tell lies, I must not tell lies. Get a grip, Tom, a grip, a* grip). The weight, the silence, the moments that would linger too long.

And there was something *off* with Harry. As much as Tom wanted to flatter himself and say he was the cause, he knew that wasn't quite true. It was subtler than that. Harry's demeanour had shifted. He was careful. *Secretive.*

It wasn't until Defence that Tom managed to prove this theory.

The class passed dully. Professor Merrythought was revising blood curses, which consisted of writing notes down from the blackboard while she fired questions at anyone who looked distracted. Afterwards, they trudged to the back of the room to practice nonverbal casting. Tom —who was rather sick of his fellow Slytherins —paired with Nina Shafiq, which gave him the opportunity to ask several questions about Granger and Weasley, all the while glancing across the room.

Harry was casting with Granger.

They were standing several feet apart, Granger with her back to Tom, Harry directly in his line of sight. And what a sight it was.

There was a slight grin on Harry's face. As Granger cast, cast with a precision that Tom had only ever seen from the three of them, Harry ducked out of the way. His wand was loose in his fingers. He was so *at ease*, so deft, so casual on his feet, that Tom's attention was caught at once.

'You're not even trying, are you?' he heard Granger say.

She fired a spell at him and Harry flicked it back towards her.

'Of course I am, Hermione,' he said. 'Oh, that was a good one!'

At her squawk of outrage, Harry laughed —a real, genuine laugh, warm and rich —his grin widening. Tom forgot about the room and Nina Shafiq. Forgot about Granger, about the Horcrux, about their argument.

'You're such a prat,' Granger said. 'This is why I don't like practising with you.'

'Because it's a bit of a *challenge*?'

But it wasn't a challenge, it was a game. And every time Harry flicked his wrist —the wand lax in his fingers, effortless —Tom's pulse quickened. Granger was casting furiously, her hair coming loose from its ponytail, but Harry only smirked, launching the spells back at her without thought.

'You haven't even cast anything!' he heard her yell. 'Give me a turn to block.'

‘Really? You look a bit … preoccupied.’

Granger growled and Harry laughed again. His head tipped back, the line of his throat on display. His cheeks were pink. When he opened his mouth, Tom saw a flash of white teeth.

‘Don’t you dare patronise me, Potter.’

Harry didn’t duel the way Tom did. He moved without thinking. As though he didn’t have to think, as though it was as effortless and natural as breathing. It was a fight without splendour or theatrics, and yet Harry didn’t realise the graceful way that he moved. The casual brilliance of his casting; the lazy accuracy with which he fired back at Granger. Now – hair hanging in Harry’s face, smile small and sly and endearing – Tom was possessed by the urge to sink his fingers into Harry’s hair, to yank him forward by his tie and kiss his lovely, stupid, brilliant mouth. And what he’d *do* to have Harry look at him with the same affection he reserved for Granger. To have that stupid grin directed at *him.* Tom would sink to his knees, and slowly open Harry’s robe, and kiss the inside of his thigh and —

You are so pathetic.

‘Are you alright, Tom?’ Nina asked him. ‘You look a bit funny.’

Tom snapped to the present. ‘I’m fine,’ he said. ‘Here - it’s your turn to cast.’

He felt detached from all of it. Nina gave him a quick smile and bowed. As a bright pink stream shot from the end of her wand, Tom dived out of the way.

It *ached.*

He didn’t want to get over Harry; he didn’t want anything except things to be the way they were before.

‘We’ll finish up in five minutes,’ Professor Merrythought called. Her eyes —like Tom’s —were on Harry and Granger.

Nina cast another spell and Tom raised a shield at the last second. It bounced backwards and she shrieked, raising her hands to her face.

‘Are you alright?’ he said absently.

‘I’m fine.’ Boils had erupted all over her face and hands but she only

clenched her teeth and cast again.

Gryffindors.

'Alright, Harry, you win! Happy, now? Ron, stop *laughing.* You know what, screw you both—'

Granger fired a last, weak curse at Harry and he raised his wand, caught Tom's eye, grin slipping.

And something shot from the end of Harry's wand —something he hadn't cast. It was dark, flickering, a long cord of magic so powerful that Tom could feel it from across the room. Granger dived out of the way and the spell collided with the nearby wall, denting it.

'What on earth —' Professor Merrythought began. She stared at Harry and Granger. 'What did you just cast, Mr Potter?'

The class had fallen silent. Harry looked at the crack in the wall and then Professor Merrythought. 'I'm not sure,' he said. 'It was a disarming spell but I overpowered it.'

'*Overpowered* it? Are you sure that's what you cast?'

'Positive.'

As she moved forward to inspect the damage, Harry traded a quick look with Weasley and Granger. It was just a flash but Tom pocketed his wand, a frown crossing his face. This was something the three of them already knew about.

'Class dismissed,' Professor Merrythought said. 'Everyone put your desk back in its original position before you leave the room.'

Tom stopped. Paused. He slowly levitated his desk, eyes lingering on the three of them, who were talking quietly. Harry shook his head, and the other two fell silent. *Later,* he mouthed. Granger nodded quickly.

Whatever it was, Tom thought, they hadn't expected this.

He chewed his lip and gave Harry another quick look, but Harry was fixing the crack in the wall, his eyebrows knitted in concentration. Tom stared at the jagged crack—smaller, smaller, until it disappeared entirely.

They were hiding something but what was it? What was it that would

cause Harry’s magic to go awry, to cause the three of them to look so troubled?

The bell rang and the students swarmed into the hall. Nina Shafiq asked Tom about their next prefect meeting and he tore his eyes away. ‘We could schedule it for tomorrow,’ he said, ‘after the Hufflepuffs' quidditch practice.’

She nodded. She was covering her face, obscuring the boils. ‘What the hell did Potter cast anyway?’

Tom's eyes went back to the wall. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. *Not yet.*

The Elder Wand

With February around the corner, all Harry's professors were talking about NEWTs.

'Remember,' squeaked Professor Flitwick, a sonorous charm amplifying his voice, 'most jobs won't even consider you if you don't have three NEWTs. For anything in the ministry, you require four. They're much more important than OWLs —and much more competitive too.'

It wasn't just the professors who were struck by a newfound urgency. Abraxas, according to his parents, had to achieve three O's in Potions, Transfiguration and Charms, and Alphard Black —to everyone's disbelief —cut Quidditch practice to two nights a week, despite their upcoming match against Gryffindor.

Swept away by studying, Harry could almost convince himself that things were normal in Hogwarts. Hermione —who had taken to wearing a watch that would shout at her to study every half an hour —was exactly as she had been in fifth-year. The common room had cleared out, it was impossible to find a seat in the library, and tension all around was heightened.

It was only when he left Ron and Hermione that the pretence disappeared. Tom and Harry hadn't spoken in weeks but Harry still had a stabbing pain in his chest when he spotted Tom. It still felt like a punch in the gut; like all the air knocking straight from his lungs.

Tom hadn't bothered Harry again —hadn't so much as asked to borrow a quill or to pass the potatoes —but his bad mood was evident to all. When Harry entered the common room, a hush would fall. Some of the younger students had taken to glaring at him, only averting their eyes when Harry looked back. Halfway through January, Lucretia cornered him outside the boys' dorm, her arms crossed, demanding that he apologise to Tom at once because he was surely going to set someone on fire. Occasionally, when Harry came back from hanging out with Ron and Hermione, Avery would mutter something about 'Gryffindors,' and 'traitors,' and while Harry's teeth would clench, he resisted the urge to snap back.

Tom's anger would fade eventually and when it did, the tension in the house would fizzle out. Tom would tire of Harry soon enough —now he knew everything there was, had experienced him so completely —

and something new would capture his interest. The thought, instead of being soothing, made Harry feel like he needed to vomit.

He could anticipate Tom in classes. Harry no longer turned his head when he heard the smooth voice Tom used to answer questions. He no longer flinched when it was nearby. When he heard Tom talking to someone else —charming, level, so false that Harry wanted to yell — he would sink his teeth into his cheek instead of turning around. He *knew* where Tom was without even looking. He was hyperaware at every moment of how things had changed.

Potions' class was the only time Harry couldn't anticipate Tom. Never —not even when Snape had been his teacher and Harry had just exploded a cauldron —had he dreaded a class more. Time froze during those long hours in the dungeons. Minutes turned into hours, seconds refused to tick past. Sitting there, with the steam and the silence and the painfully loud chopping, Harry felt like he was in some unmoving nightmare.

Even before they had been friendly, the silence wasn't so painstaking. They had argued and sniped at each other. Tom always made some cynical remark, Harry always rebutted. No matter how much tension was between them, Tom was chatty: it was simply his nature.

Now the silence was precise. Intentional. Tom didn't speak but Harry heard the slam of his knife against the chopping board, saw the tension lingering around his jaw, in the careless sweep of his eyes. The division was starker than it had ever been, with their chairs as far apart as the desk allowed, their arms never grazing.

Harry was constantly fighting with the desire to speak. When he left the dungeons, it was as though Tom's presence lingered. The effort required to carry out the class with Tom —to sit there and not speak, feelings festering, every second standing still —left Harry feeling like he had faced a dementor. He was numb and miserable for hours after the class and never with an appetite for lunch.

It was reluctantly that Harry now waited for Tom to come back from the store-cupboard. A timer was ticking on Professor Slughorn's desk. Five minutes and their cauldrons would be lit. Ten and the first set of ingredients prepared.

Eleven minutes and he'd sneak a glance at Tom. Twelve and he'd be struck with the urge to vomit. Twenty and he'd ask to go to the toilet, chair screeching, fleeing for air, don't look around, don't, don't.

But this day was different.

They had been working for fifty minutes when Tom spoke. The classroom was a haze of crimson fumes and Tom had rolled his sleeves up his forearms: a cruel and unusual punishment. With the sound of bubbling water and the lazy chatter of students, Harry was convinced that he had misheard: there was no way Tom was talking to him.

He dumped a handful of bat eyes into the cauldron which turned a thick, gloopy yellow. Frowning in thought, he turned back to the recipe. Somewhere he had missed a step.

'Harry.'

Harry turned around, the sound of his name from Tom's mouth like an electric shock. 'What?' he said, leaning further into his side of the desk.

Tom was cutting absent-mindedly, making quick work of what had taken Harry the previous half an hour to accomplish. The Gaunt ring gleamed on his middle finger. His eyes were locked on Harry.

'How's your friend, Belinda?'

Harry tore his gaze back to his potion. 'She's fine,' he said shortly. The cauldron was simmering gently. It didn't need stirring for another seven minutes and both of them knew it.

'I think it's fascinating,' Tom said, 'the depths with which you'd go to maintain that friendship. You forgave her so easily. But, of course, that was different. Belinda's crime was only *murder.'*

'It *was* different,' Harry said.

It was the first time they had spoken in weeks and already Tom had managed to launch Harry's heart into his throat. The noise of the room faded. The timer on Slughorn's desk ceased to tick.

'How? She framed innocent people for a murder she committed—a murder she *so carefully planned*—and yet you turn a blind eye on it.'

There was a strange lightness to Tom's voice. He was watching Harry steadily, his face revealing nothing.

'I wasn't aware you were being forced to marry Myrtle, Tom. Or you had a sister you so much as cared for. The difference between you and

Belinda is that she had a cause and you were relieving your boredom.'

'If you want to strip it down to nothing, I suppose. She still killed someone.'

'For a *cause*. What was your cause, Tom — facing the consequences of your actions?'

'Myrtle was a mistake.'

'You used her death to make a horcrux and to frame Hagrid. Can't you see that's slightly different?'

Tom shrugged. 'Death is death. I framed Hagrid, she framed her parents. Your sense of right and wrong changes constantly. Your morals are so slippery when it comes to your friends, and yet so unyielding for me.'

That was so blatantly untrue that Harry resisted the urge to yell at him.

'You're different,' Harry said. 'Belinda doesn't plan on killing hundreds of people in the future. She doesn't plan on making horcruxes, gathering a cult of followers, and *taking over Britain.* Her plans after school are to look after her sister. Remind me of yours again?'

Tom shrugged indifferently. 'They're undecided,' he said. 'And anyway, I'm sure they're better than the lies you tell yourself you want. Do you think you can ever have a normal life again? You're going to be dissatisfied. Pretending you want to be an Auror? Playing *Quidditch*? Cosying up with Weasley and Granger?'

'Jealous?'

It was dizzying how quickly they could slip back to trading barbs. Looking at Tom hurt —he was right there, inches away, so close Harry could count every speck of colour in his eyes. Arguing seemed the only way for Harry to maintain his composure. It was better to get caught up in the petty remarks than face the impossibility of his feelings.

'Of them? Don't be ridiculous. I'm sure the three of you will have a wonderful time holed up in some shitty flat, practising your self-righteous ways.'

Harry clenched the chopping knife. It had been so long that he almost relished the contempt in Tom's voice; so long that he wanted to laugh —laugh and laugh and laugh, because instead he might burst into tears. There was a wide, delighted smile on Tom's face and Harry wasn't sure if it was anger that made him want to punch Tom or the desire to make contact with his skin one more time.

'Why are you obsessed with me then, Tom? It's not going to magically change so why can't you accept for once in your life that this is over and you're just making it worse?'

Harry hadn't meant to betray the last bit.

Tom stilled, the mocking smile slipping away. And just like that they were no longer pretending.

Harry wondered if he was going to be sick. Had something fallen in his potion? Surely the fumes were what addled his brain, what made it impossible to think, to function, to even exist in the same space as Tom. For a moment they worked — a moment so unbearable that Harry licked his lips, suffocating. Being here with Tom any longer was impossible.

'I was just curious about your newfound hypocrisy,' Tom said then. The lightness was back in his voice — now so stiff and forced that even Slughorn would have been able to decipher its insincerity. '*I* told Belinda to kill her fiancé. Can you still forgive her now? Or because the plan came from me, are you going to have to think it through with Granger? She'll tell you how to make up your mind.'

Harry sat up, relishing in the newfound coldness. 'I didn't take you for the needy type, Tom,' he said, in the same emotionless voice Tom used. 'Change your plans after school and we'll talk.'

But he wouldn't, of course. Harry may as well have asked Tom to change his name, snap his wand and take up priesthood.

The timer ticked on Professor Slughorn's desk.

Thirty minutes until Harry could flee the dungeons. Exit the castle, loosen his tie, breathe the open air.

The fumes were making it impossible to think, to react, and the only thing in his line of sight was Tom's pale hand resting on the desk.

As they sat there in silence, Harry yearned for a reaction from Tom so

badly that he feared what he'd say to get one—or what he'd do.

When the bell rang and Harry escaped into the corridor, the thought of lunch made his stomach churn. He was restless, itchy, banging into a suit of armour in his haste to go somewhere else.

'What happened?' Hermione said, but she didn't understand, she couldn't. Not the way one look could make him feel hollow for days, one sentence and it all came blazing into colour and life.

'It's nothing,' he said. 'I hate sitting beside him, that's all.'

He didn't go to the Great Hall (lunch meant Tom and the effort of maintaining a conversation with Abraxas while acting normal). He didn't go back to the common room either (Lucretia sometimes ate there alone and Harry wasn't in the mood for her chatter). He wandered absently around the dungeons, and —to his immense disbelief —stumbled upon Tom.

'You're not at lunch,' Harry said.

They looked at each other, Tom standing a little distance away, the sleeves of his robes still rolled up.

'Neither are you.'

Tom's hair was mussed like he had run his hands through it. Harry swallowed and didn't move closer. Didn't ask what had got him in such a state.

'Can we just...'Tom began, no trace of the coldness from earlier in his voice. 'Can we just *talk?'*

It was something about the way he was standing, awkwardly, as though he wasn't quite sure what to do with his hands or feet, that made Harry hesitate.

'Alright,' he said. He pulled down the handle of the nearest door and they stepped inside, briskly, looking around instead of at each other.

It was a potions classroom, cauldrons gleaming copper and pewter, chairs neatly pushed into desks. A smudge of chalk lingered on the

blackboard, as though someone had hastily wiped through it, trying to take back what they had just written. When he couldn't look around any longer, Harry turned to Tom. 'Yeah?'

Tom had closed the door behind them but he was standing uncharacteristically far away. Like Harry, he gazed around the room, pausing on a piece of floor a fraction from Harry's feet. He glanced up.

'Are you still angry about the Horcrux?'

'Yes,' Harry said. 'Are you still creepily attached to it?'

Tom's eye twitched. Then, looking like he had been forced to endure the company of Ron and Hermione without making one snide remark for hours, he took a breath and said, 'so, I never mentioned you're a horcrux. I lied about it. I lied to you. I lie to everyone but I'm —'he was speaking as though fighting an Imperius curse, teeth clenched, choking the words out—'I'm *sorry*.'

Harry stared at him in astonishment. 'You're sorry?' he repeated.

'I'm not saying it again.'

'You actually ….' Harry stopped because he was only making this worse than it already was. For Tom Riddle, an apology was like an olive branch. It was impossible. It was inconceivable. And suddenly it hurt to look at Tom and the silly, frustrated expression on his face. It made Harry's heart burn.

(If it was an olive branch it was a broken one, snapped in half and barely hanging together, leaves wilted, fruit spoiled).

'Thank you,' Harry said, clearing his throat. 'But you know there's not a chance in hell we can do this again.'

'I know that.' A muscle in Tom's jaw worked. '*Obviously.* You refuse to be anything but overbearingly moral these days, as though you can erase everything you did. But you're not good and pretending you can take it all back makes you an idiot.'

'I know I can't,' Harry said, 'but I can live with not being good. But being part of your schemes, your crazy ideas? I'd rather *die.'*

They were closer now — Tom had taken a step forward, his face hard. Harry could almost feel his breath. The ghost of his skin.

The proximity made him dizzy and Tom seemed to sense it for his voice was suddenly low and no longer bitter. He was in *Harry's space* and the long list of reasons started to wilt in Harry's mind.

Tom was close enough to kiss and Harry wanted to *so badly*. His blood surged in his body. Tom's face was earnest and lovely and —

'You wouldn't have to be part of anything, Harry. You wouldn't even have to know.'

Harry's throat bobbed. Tom's eyes were so *earnest* —some part of him had to believe this madness he was saying, had to be desperate enough to think Harry may too.

'I'm sorry,' Harry said, 'but I'm never going to change my mind. You want to take over the Wizarding World. I'm not going to passively ignore it because I …'

Loveyouloveyouloveyou.

'...want to keep our relationship. Even knowing about it makes me sick.'

Tom stepped away. He looked like Harry had backhanded him across the face. Very quietly, he said, 'why did you even start this if it makes you sick? Why did you have to become decisive *now?'*

'I …'

Harry licked his lips. It was like looking upon something awful: a body strewn across a road, an animal running in front of a swerving car, and he was helpless to look away. Tom seemed ready to explode or shatter or reveal something so truly horrible they would never look at each other again.

'I didn't think it would mean anything.'

Tom laughed — a cold, hollow laugh — and took another step away. 'You think it's such a little demand,' he said, 'and it is for you — for someone so moral, so rigid, so devoid of ambition. You want everything to fall into place. For nothing to change except *everything.* My plans, my ambitions, everything I have worked towards. Do you think I'd abandon it all for *you*?'

He raised his head and Harry's breathing stuttered. Tom's eyes were red. Not flecked with red or flashing as they sometimes did, but

blazing scarlet.

‘I didn’t say everything you are.’

‘What’s the difference? You want me to change. You want me to be good, and moral, like a dog kept on a fucking *muzzle.’*

‘I didn’t say —'

‘What next? Should I go and apologise to Hagrid? Dig up dear old dad? Snap my wand and march to *Azkaban*?’

‘I don’t mean —'

‘Do you really think any of that would make a difference? You want me to change so you don’t feel guilty but you chose this, Harry. You. Or do you pretend that you like *that* Voldemort? The fantasy version in your head?’

Harry couldn’t speak for a moment. Tom’s face was dark, savage, yet strikingly, unbearably *Tom.* It was true, of course, Harry had always known it. He was drawn to Tom the same as any of the others. Drawn like a moth to a bright, flickering flame, unable to resist, unable to tamp down the desire. All this was of his choosing.

But Harry had made peace with that.

‘You’re full of shit, Tom,’ he said. ‘I didn’t tell you to do *anything* for me. I don’t want you to reinvent your whole personality or do everything I say. We’re talking about killing people. I don’t care if you hate my friends. I don’t care what twisted thoughts go through your head. I care about your plans for the future and all the horrible things you want to do.’

Harry no longer felt revulsed by those scarlet eyes. He no longer thought of Voldemort, who was a secondary thought, taken over by a stronger, more consuming one: Tom, and the desperate look on his face. Tom, who looked ready to shout or snap or break something.

‘You still treat it like a joke,’ Harry said. ‘Like this whole thing was a game, and now you’re bored so it can all go back to normal. It can’t. I can’t do this with you, knowing it’s going to explode in a few months, and you’re going to lie to me and hide things. Or if it doesn’t, what the hell would happen after Hogwarts? You’re going to gather more followers and try to become Voldemort. *That’s* what I have a problem with.’

‘God, you’re dramatic. Did the horcrux thing freak you out? You’re acting like this is a much bigger deal than it really is. You’re *so* scared to let me have any power over you, it’s a joke. You already carry around a piece of my soul but you think you can just *pretend* we’re nothing?’

Harry’s face darkened at the horcrux comment. He hadn’t meant to argue with Tom coming into this classroom, but it seemed inevitable from the moment Tom had opened his mouth in potions’.

‘You are mad,’ Harry said. ‘And guess what, Tom? If our relationship is so easy and casual, then what’s the big deal? I’ve ended it. Go find someone else to entertain you.’

He regretted the wording at once.

Tom paused and tilted his head. ‘Really?’ he said, in a voice that was so flat Harry shivered. Tom’s eyes weren’t quite red anymore but narrowed and dark.

‘You know, I didn't mean … I don't want you to …'

‘*Fuck someone else?*'

Harry winced. ‘Obviously,’ he snapped. ‘But we’re *over* like I said, so do whatever the hell you want. I don’t control your decisions. And you clearly think this whole thing’s a joke anyway.’

‘I don’t think it’s a joke. I think you’re selfish.’

They stared at each other. Harry took a step backwards, feet suddenly clumsy. He hadn’t wanted to fight with Tom, so how had it happened? And why, even now, did it feel like his insides were ripping apart?

‘I’m selfish?’ Harry repeated quietly. ‘I’m the one who has chosen. *You* think you can have me, and Voldemort, and everything else you want. It’s been a *month.* Do you think I’m going to change my mind just because you feel annoyed and entitled?’

Tom’s eyes flashed and Harry steeled himself. The lamplights flickered overhead. The potions’ classroom smelled like must and the store cupboard door was ajar, a slant of light peeking through.

‘I’m sorry!’ Tom yelled, so violently out of character that Harry froze. ‘I know it’s over, I KNOW! I just –’ he looked ready to tear out his hair.

‘Why is it all or nothing? Why do I have to give up *it all*? You say it’s not everything, but it is — it’s my whole life, Harry. It’s who I *am*. And you refuse to compromise, or sacrifice anything, or even take a risk.’

Harry looked at him disbelievingly. Tom was breathing heavily, his jaw clenched. A horrible look crossed his face like he wanted to take back what he had just said and couldn’t.

‘Do you seriously … ‘Harry shook his head. ‘Do you actually think that? You have no idea how much I’d sacrifice for you. What I’d *do* to myself. You’re everything I despise, everything I go against. My friends can’t *stand you*, and yet … if it was anything else except this … ’he choked with the effort to suppress the words. ‘You don’t have a clue.’

It felt like something was crawling up Harry’s throat, thick and slimy and corrosive. His heart was like a pulsing mass of blood and rot. His lips, numb. Stupid.

He was such an idiot to have let it become like this.

He would willingly tear himself into tatters for Tom, chasing a feeling, a lie. He had gotten swept up in the casual intimacy, the feeling he had mistaken for a connection. Just because Tom’s face would soften when it was only them, how he would smile, small and genuine and fond.

Except it had never been anything to Tom except a link back to his soul; a fascination with the idea of Harry as a component of himself.

‘Fine,’ Tom said. ‘It’s over.’

He looked so *bitter* —so wild and desperate — that Harry had to look away.

The silence that followed was too long.

Harry looked around the room and willed his magic to not act up. He felt like he was no longer in control of his body, nevermind his wand. He couldn’t look at Tom without the memories rising. He wanted to bolt but something kept his feet rooted to the ground.

‘I’m sorry. We can just be … civil.’

‘Civil,’ Tom repeated flatly. He shrugged. ‘If that’s what you want.’

Harry bit his lip. ‘It’s not because of the Horcrux. It’s just … over.’

‘Because of my personality.’

‘Tom,’ he tried, sounding more desperate than he wanted to. ‘You know I don’t care about that. We’re never going to agree. Just forget about the horcrux, and the prophecy, and all the reasons you think we’re similar. We can’t compromise this.’

‘I know.’ Tom forced his mouth into something resembling a smile. ‘See you in potions, Harry.’

‘No, wait —’

‘What?’

Tom had moved past him and they stood very close. In the lights of the classroom, he looked very pale, and lovely, and the whole thing made Harry’s stomach hurt.

‘Nothing,’ Harry said. Every second that passed was like pressing his fingers into a bruise. ‘Bye, Tom.’

Both of them hesitated for a moment and Tom pushed open the door and stepped into the hall.

Hands trembling, Harry sat down at the nearest desk. He could hear the sound of footsteps walking away and then silence. The classroom was dim. A tap was leaking several desks away —*drip, drip, drip*.

There was something heavy pressing down on Harry’s chest, bringing with it the knowledge of how much he wanted to give in. Tom could get under his skin exactly as he intended and it *hurt*, just as much as it had the day Harry found out about the horcrux.

He waited until he was quite sure Tom was up the stairs, and then, feeling rather sick, he left the classroom.

Harry arrived at lunch ten minutes before it ended. He snagged a couple of sandwiches that were left behind, gulped down a glass of water and quickly exited the Hall. Before he could decide whether he wanted to risk the Slytherin Common Room, he stumbled into Ron

and Hermione.

‘Oh, there you are!’ Hermione said. She had come from the Hall and her satchel was slung over her shoulder. ‘You missed lunch.’

‘You and … Riddle,’ Ron said.

Harry shrugged. Talking about Tom was like swallowing pieces of glass. What was the point if he would only get nagged at?

‘We were talking.’

‘Talking?’ Hermione’s eyebrows knitted. ‘About what?’

‘It doesn’t matter. It was nothing anyway.’

‘You look pale.’ Hermione exchanged a quick look with Ron. ‘Harry, do you think it’s wise, talking to Riddle after …. well, you know …’

‘After the complete fiasco that was last month?’ He shook his head. ‘It doesn’t make a difference, Hermione, it’s over. I’m going for a walk.’

There was something about their tender concern — something about the way they exchanged looks, confused, doubtful — that made Harry feel like someone had split open his chest and sunk their fingers into his heart.

‘Do you want —um—company?’

‘You’re not seeing him again, are you?’

Harry bristled. ‘No,’ he said. ‘No, I'm going for a walk.’

He moved to pass them when Hermione grabbed his arm. ‘Harry,’ she said firmly. ‘You know you can talk to us, right? We’re your best friends.’

Her eyes were wide. Earnest.

‘I *love* you.’

Harry’s throat constricted so horribly that he thought he was going to choke. The contact was too much. The sound of her voice, the proximity. Very gently, he pushed her away.

‘I know, Hermione,’ he said, staring down at the tiled floor and seeing nothing. ‘I love you too.’

‘If you need space, that’s okay. But if you want to talk …’

‘It’s really fine.’

‘Fine?’ Ron scoffed. ‘You know, Harry, being down in the dungeons all the time probably makes it worse for you. You should ask Slughorn to change your seat —'

‘I’m not asking him that.’ Harry touched his face. His skin was unbearably warm. ‘Look, don’t worry about it. I’ll get over it. It’s not a big deal.’

‘Will you?’ Hermione said. ‘Because honestly, Harry, I don’t think you’ll be fine until you get out of the dungeons and start thinking about something else.’

‘Don’t you think I’ve tried? He’s in my *head.’*

They shared a worried look.

‘I’m just saying,’ Hermione said, determinedly going on, ‘talking to Riddle only makes things worse —'

‘God, Hermione, do you ever give me a break?’

Her eyebrows shot upwards and Harry apologised at once. He wasn’t sure where his anger had come from; why it was so hot, so strong. They were his best friends and they were *trying*.

Why couldn’t it be enough?

‘Stop treating me like I’m delicate, okay? Right now, I just want to be left alone.’

Hermione crossed her arms. ‘Fine. If that’s really what you want.’

‘Yeah, if you want us to ignore the fact you’re miserable and let you mope around for the next month. That’s what *friends* would do, isn’t it?’

Harry sighed. ‘I’m not doing this right now, Ron, I’m sorry. Look —'he stopped, as a jolt of pain rippled through his head, so intense it left him dizzy.

‘Harry?’ Ron said uncertainty.

‘I’ll see you at dinner.’

Harry set off down the corridor trying not to quicken his pace. Sweat pin-pricked his forehead. His hands shook. It was as though stars had burst before his eyes, bright, red-hot stars, their aftershocks continuing to ripple past. He felt a stab of guilt for the way he had brushed Ron and Hermione aside, though knew that nothing they said could make him feel better. It was as though Tom had infected his entire body. Harry wanted him so badly that he felt sick.

Another jolt of pain went through his head as he reached the dungeons and Harry's teeth sank into his bottom lip as the world sharpened and then blurred. A tinny noise was ringing distantly in his ears. Stuttering out the password, Harry made his way into the Slytherin Common Room and up the stairs.

The green tapestries lurched before his eyes. With hands clapped over his forehead, Harry stumbled to his four-poster and flung himself onto the bed. Eyes closed, a pillow over his face, he heard the door squeak.

'What's wrong?' Abraxas asked tentatively. 'You looked like you were going to be sick.'

Harry heard him take a step forward. The sound of his voice was like something from underwater — distant, echoing, and yet Harry winced.

'I have a headache,' he said. 'Can you close my curtains?'

Another jolt of pain made him groan. It felt like his forehead was splitting open, sharp, brilliant, and the room faded away.

'Are you sure you don't need to go to the hospital wing?' Abraxas said. 'That seems bad ….'

Harry's teeth split through his bottom lip and he gasped. Sitting up, he pushed aside the pillow and stared around.

'No, it's not that sort of headache. It's fucking *Tom.* I mean, my bloody *scar* …'

'What?'

'Nothing,' Harry said. 'It's a cursed scar. It acts up someti — *fuck. Fuck.'* He winced, the room starting to blur around the edges. He was hot, feverish, and so dizzy with pain that he didn't trust himself to speak.

‘That sounds awful,’ Abraxas said. ‘But what does that have to do with Tom?’

‘Nothing. It’s — ugh, it will be fine in a minute.’

But it wasn’t. Harry’s headache lasted for what seemed like hours, so much so that he closed his curtains and conjured a wet rag to cover his scar. In the dark, with only the ripples of pain, everything was detached and dreamlike. Harry’s thoughts pulsed past in scarlet blobs. Every throb of pain brought a sharp sensation of anger; a dull aftershock of longing; a swimming image of Tom’s vacant face.

The air seemed to hang with pressure, all of it pressing inwards on his skull. With only the dark and the spikes of pain, there was no controlling the onslaught of thoughts. Harry’s insides constricted with want when he thought of their conversation from earlier. He could hear Tom’s voice - amplified, smooth, ringing in his ears. There was no escaping the high sound of laughter - dizzyingly intense, slightly sharp and so *real* that Harry’s chest hurt.

Images swam before his eyes. A daring smile. The white flash of teeth. The delicate veins of a wrist, crisscrossing and blue.

Harry wanted to sink his fingers into Tom’s pale, dead heart and make him feel something, *anything*.

And like the steady pulse of blood through his body, Harry was aware of the horcrux. It shimmered at the edge of his vision, a permanent stain in his peripheral. Every pulse of pain brought a surge of loathing. Why did *Harry* have to deal with this? Where were Tom’s headaches? His pain?

He could never truly believe Tom while it existed. Never stop doubting all of it — the root of Tom’s sick fascination, the motive behind his desperate ways. Harry could never be free.

‘Why are the lights off?’

For the second time, the dormitory door opened. Rosier’s voice floated towards Harry unnaturally loud. Harry sat up, removing his tie which was wrapped around his eyes, and pressed the damp cloth to his cheek.

‘I have a headache.’

The lights flared to life. Harry winced at the onslaught of brightness

and shot Rosier a dirty look.

‘Sorry,’ Rosier said half-heartedly. ‘I need to get some books then I’ll leave you alone.’ He crossed the floor without sparing Harry a glance. There was an unnaturalness to his movements — something too stiff, too careful, too uncertain.

‘I thought you and Tom were fucking in here.’

Rosier’s throat bobbed as he said it. He shot Harry a look, eyebrows raised in expectancy.

‘Why would we fuck in the dark?’ Harry replied.

Rosier’s eyes went wide. He stopped, several feet away from Harry, who waited, massaging his temples.

‘You’re really finished then?’ he said, ‘with Tom?’

‘*What?’*

‘Nothing,’ Rosier snapped. ‘Forget it.’

He reached his trunk and started to rummage through it. While Harry’s headache was ebbing, he couldn’t muster any sympathy for Rosier’s awkward behaviour. After several moments, Rosier emerged with a stack of textbooks.

‘Did you apologise?’

‘Did I —’ Harry raised his eyebrows. ‘To Tom*?* For bloody *what*?’

‘It doesn’t matter for what. It’s Tom. You can’t just … displease him.’

‘I prefer “dump him” but whatever.’

‘See? Like that! You just — you can’t just say —'he pressed the books to his chest. ‘You’re allowed to say whatever you damn want, it’s ridiculous. He treats you like an *equal.’*

Harry’s head was still throbbing. He lifted the rag from his cheek— strongly considered firing it at Rosier — and placed it on the bedside table.

‘What’s your point?’

‘I’ve been here for seven years! We all have! But he only gives a damn

about *you.'*

Harry chewed the inside of his cheek, trying not to show the way the words stung. 'Why do you want his attention so badly if he doesn't care about you?'

Rosier scoffed. 'Of course he cares. It wasn't always like this, you know. Ever since *you* came here, everything's changed.'

'I'm very sorry for inconveniencing you,' Harry said dryly. 'I'm sure things will go back to their normal, cult-like ways now.'

'You don't have a clue, Potter. You can do anything you want and still he'll treat you better than anyone else here.'

'So, you're jealous Tom likes me better than you?'

'No, it's —'a frustrated look crossed his face. Harry could tell he was choosing his words carefully; that underneath the mockery was an undercurrent of fear. 'It's *easy* for you. It doesn't matter what you do or think — there are no consequences.'

Rosier was standing several metres away from him, as if afraid to come closer.

'Oh,' Harry said quietly. 'I thought you liked the whole … cult thing.'

'I do! I just …. do you know what it's like to constantly hold your tongue? Even if I did disagree with Tom — which I *don't* — I couldn't say anything! No one could!' He shook his head. 'You don't get it, Potter, you've always done whatever the hell you want. You're practically a Gryffindor.'

'So, I've heard.'

'Anyway—'he sneered—'enjoy your nap.'

Rosier stepped out of the room before Harry could argue that he wasn't, in fact, having a nap. The door slammed.

Listening to Rosier storm away, Harry sat up. The pain in his head had dulled to a throbbing ache and he tentatively touched his scar, which burned hot. It was like coming down from a fever.

He wasn't sure how long he had been lying there. Time was slow, fuzzy, and the encounter with Rosier was like something from a dream.

He vanished the cloth he had placed over his scar and slowly opened his trunk. The battered wood creaked under his hands. The anti-intruder charms resisted. The dormitory was dark and silent and Harry's hands were like two fleshy blobs before his eyes, detached from his body.

He took the Elder Wand from between the folds of clothes and the noise in his head quietened. It was so wonderfully cool that Harry lifted it, pressing the wooden handle to his scar.

It was as though the magic of the wand fought the pull of the horcrux, anchoring it, dulling the hot prickle of pain. Harry breathed outwards, closing his eyes. As the pain abided, all that was left was the pulse of the horcrux against the wood.

He stopped.

He could feel it if he really concentrated. The magic of the wand — like a rush of cool air, a whisper — and the arrhythmic throb of his scar.

A rush of excitement coursed through him. If only he could channel the cord of magic that was the horcrux. Separate it somehow. *Yank* it outwards.

He put down the wand, his mind suddenly clear. Even the throb of pain was an afterthought now. Stowing the wand in his trunk and charming it locked, Harry stood up and yanked his curtains open.

He needed to go to the library.

Career Meeting

Harry forgot about the pain in his head as he made his way to the library. Dizzy with excitement, he stayed there until curfew began and the librarian shooed him out. With his invisibility cloak, he came back and browsed the restricted section, his hands ghosting over the tomes, his wand light illuminating the golden lettering.

Harry didn't feel tired as he read through the night, and when he woke in the morning — his head resting on a desk in the Room of Requirement, his neck cricked, a red mark on his cheek — it was to a feeling of tired satisfaction, and a stirring eagerness that couldn't be ignored.

The Elder Wand buzzed in his hand, unspoken potential in every spell it cast. He hadn't told Ron and Hermione his thoughts yet, for fear they wouldn't come true. It was too early to get his hopes up, and yet he could practically taste it. Maybe. Just maybe.

The rain cleared up the next morning. Harry had skipped dinner the night before and, suddenly ravenous, he made his way to the hall. Tom never woke early on the weekend, and yet Harry scanned the table anyway, before sitting down beside Abraxas and Belinda.

'Hello,' Abraxas said, spooning scrambled eggs onto his plate. 'Are you feeling better? You kind of disappeared last night.'

Harry reached for the teapot. 'I was in the library. My —er—migraine disappeared.'

'Migraine?' Belinda said. Her eyes flickered to his scar. 'Tom was in an awful mood yesterday. He practically bit the head off Avery.'

'Awful,' Abraxas agreed. His eyes widened. 'Did he curse you?'

'Of course not,' Harry said, frowning at the thought. He couldn't imagine Tom cursing him anymore, or anything except his disbelieving, shattered face. 'Can we not talk about him please?'

'Sorry.' Abraxas took a bite of his eggs and swallowed. 'Oh! Take a look at the prophet - fifth page.'

The Great Hall was almost empty and sunlight was streaming through the windows, gleaming against the silver trays of breakfast food.

Abraxas slid the newspaper to Harry, which showed two quidditch teams arguing mid-air and a blazing headline: *Caerphilly Catapults suspended from the upcoming World Cup after cheating scandal.*

Harry flicked to the fifth page and scanned the text.

Charles and Allegra Lestrange sentenced to a lifetime in Azkaban for the murder of Arnoldo Flint, the long-time owner of Azkaban prison. It is known that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement has been extensively building a case against Charles Lestrange ever since his close connection to Grindelwald was revealed. For more on Gellert Grindelwald and his reign of terror, see page nine …

'I like the Azkaban bit,' Belinda said, when Harry finally looked back up. 'It's fitting, how Arnoldo used to run the prison.'

Harry blew out a breath. 'So you got away with it. It's over.'

'Yeah, I …' she stirred her cereal, no longer looking at him. 'Whatever you may think, Harry, they deserve Azkaban. And I didn't want to have to … I didn't …' her jaw clenched. 'They were aiding Grindelwald, and they may not have killed Arnoldo but they killed others. Just because they're mudbloods — sorry, muggleborns — doesn't mean it's any fairer.'

'It's none of my business,' Harry said. 'And I get it. You're not the only one who's had to do awful things when they had no choice. I'm just glad you're okay.'

They looked at each other for a moment. Belinda levitated two sugar cubes from the centre of the table and dropped them in her tea. She had mashed her cereal into a brown slop and now pushed it away.

'They used to obliviate me,' Belinda said abruptly. 'I can barely remember anything from when I was a kid. They'd do something in a fit of rage and then make sure I couldn't remember it. Our food was so stuffed with potions — with poisons — that before Hogwarts is like a dream. It's honestly surprising that I know how to read.'

Harry's fork was frozen at his mouth. 'You don't have to justify it,' he said. 'You don't have to explain.'

'And Claudia,' Belinda continued, undeterred. 'There was a Boggart in our house last summer. It was on the third floor so I didn't realise. But they did. Father decided it was time she toughened up, developed a thicker skin, you know. And one day I came home from Diagon Alley

and she wouldn't speak. She wouldn't move or respond or anything. I found out later that he'd locked her in with the Boggart all day. Apparently while I was at Hogwarts, they'd use it as a sort of punishment. A *punishment.* She doesn't even have a wand yet.'

'I'm so sorry —'

'Forgot it. I'm glad they're in Azkaban and I only regret not doing it sooner.' Her hands tightened around her mug as she exhaled. The fight disappeared from her body and she slumped in the seat, taking a slow sip of tea.

'I'm really sorry you had to go through that,' Harry said. 'And this too. But at least it's over now. You never have to see any of them again.'

She gave him a weak smile. Abraxas, who didn't seem surprised by any of the things Belinda had said, carefully touched her shoulder.

A couple of younger students sat down on the bench near them. Harry swore their eyes lingered on him a little longer than necessary but when he looked back, the attention disappeared.

'Anyway, Harry,' Abraxas said, clearing his throat to break the sudden lapse in conversation. 'What were you doing in the library all night?'

Harry's lips twitched. 'Just researching,' he said casually. 'And by the way, do either of you have any books on rituals that I could borrow?'

It was as though his life suddenly had a new purpose. Every moment of spare time was spent in the library. Harry wolfed down his food at meals and only came back to the common room at night, after reading for so long that the pages began to blur. The books Belinda had let him borrow would never be found in Hogwarts. They were a set of heavy tomes from her family library that only became readable after he pricked his finger and smeared it down the spine.

His mind was so full of dark magic — of rituals, and spells and curses — that he felt like Tom. But despite his increasingly disturbing reading material, Harry couldn't find anything that would help him remove the horcrux. The rituals were too specific, the sacrifices too great. He needed something that wouldn't require a litre of his blood

or a constant screeching noise in his ears.

The only person who would know what Harry was looking for was the one he couldn't tell. Harry made sure to do his reading in the Room of Requirement and never leave books in the dorm. He didn't take the Elder Wand out in classes, or keep it anywhere Tom could find. He didn't tell anyone, and only after three days with no success did Harry approach Ron and Hermione with his idea.

'Oh, god, these are awful,' Hermione said, running her hand down the yellowing pages of *Blood Magic and its Uses.* They were in the Room of Requirement, which had turned into a makeshift library, complete with a ladder, a desk and several battered red sofas. Her legs were crossed beneath her, the book held up as she read aloud.

'Here, listen to this. The Enhancement Ritual requires a powerful stream of power to feed off in order to increase the caster's affinity for dark magic. As a result, the wielder's ability to cast light spells —for example, the Patronus Charm — will decrease substantially. Magic of a nature that conflicts with the ritual can result in explosive, harmful effects, the extent of which are not quite known.'

She flicked another page. 'Isn't that just vile? It tells you practically nothing about how the ritual tampers with your magic. And what sort of magic conflicts with it anyway? What if you were unable to apparate, or levitate anything, or cast a healing charm, all because it's deemed too light? That's hardly worth removing the horcrux for.'

'You get rid of one magic parasite in return for another,' Ron agreed. He stifled a yawn. 'Maybe Dumbledore will know something. That is if he'll tell us.'

Harry was determined to remain optimistic, however. He was sure he had felt the tug of the horcrux the evening he had pressed the wand to his forehead. He only had to find a way to tap into it.

The discussion with Tom had solidified it. It never would have worked. And as he focused on his studies (with an intensity he had never before mustered for academics), the thought didn't envelop everything else. Harry no longer allowed himself the possibility — the infinitesimal glimmer of hope — that things could change.

It still hurt when they ran into each other unexpectedly — bleary mornings in the bathroom, an empty common room, a half-glance — but the tension had disappeared. There was acceptance now, quiet and definite. While they worked in silence in potions, it was no longer so

suffocating. Tom didn't want to bargain with him anymore. For the first time ever, they were in agreement.

Harry's scar would prickle when Death Eater meetings were on, but not with the same intensity it had the week before. The throb of pain only cemented the fact that he needed to remove the horcrux and sever the final grip Tom had on his life.

Two weeks into his newfound project, Professor Slughorn pinned a notice in the Slytherin Common Room. *Seventh Year Career Meetings*. There was a long list of names, Harry's halfway down, wedged between *Malfoy, Abraxas* and *Riddle, Tom...*

Abraxas, who was peering over Harry's shoulder, made a mournful noise.

'Every Slug Club gathering's like a career meeting for me,' he said. 'I swear, my father writes to Slughorn weekly, asking about my grades. He's obsessed.'

The Slytherins weren't the only ones meeting with their Head of House. The next morning in Charms, Ron told Harry how a similar notice had appeared overnight in the Gryffindor Common Room. 'At least I have Dumbledore to talk to,' he said. 'He already knows how screwed we are.'

Hermione had a more optimistic attitude. She had drawn up a diagram showing her future prospects, which branched in seven different ways. As she explained to Harry and Ron, only one of them ended with homelessness. 'See? I mean, obviously the ministry isn't achievable right now, but I've always loved research …'

What with ending things with Tom, and researching his new abilities, Harry hadn't given the future much thought. If anything, severing ties with Tom had made it easier to reflect on the present. He could think of *after Hogwarts* without being reminded of the timer resting over his head and all the unspoken truths they had been ignoring.

'Do you still want to be an Auror?' he asked Ron, as they leafed through books on wandlore.

'Definitely not,' Ron said. 'That was back when your fame could have gotten us anywhere. What's the chance of getting into Auror training now? And there's Riddle too - god knows what he plans to get up to after Hogwarts. Or how Dumbledore's going to deal with him.'

Harry closed his book and stretched out his arms.

‘You thought I’d get you into Auror training?’ he said sceptically. ‘Are you forgetting that I was meant to kill Voldemort?’

‘I believed you were going to do it, Harry. I couldn’t — I couldn’t accept that you’d just die.’ He jerked a finger towards the book between them, a frown crossing his face. ‘And that’s why if any of this nonsense requires virgin blood, or severed limbs, or mutilated animal hearts, we’re not doing it.’

Harry arched an eyebrow. ‘Virgin blood? What exactly have you been reading?’

‘Oh, shut up,’ Ron said, though the tips of his ears were pink. ‘You know what I mean. I don’t want you to die.’

‘Well, neither do I,’ Harry replied. ‘And I don’t know about the whole Auror thing either. Honestly, I just want to do something new. No war, no expectations, no life-or-death decisions. Is that too much to ask?’

‘Of course not,’ Hermione said. ‘But haven’t you always wanted to be an Auror?’

Harry shrugged. ‘An Auror fitted. I suppose I didn’t really think about it too much. There was only Voldemort and trying to live through that.’

They mulled over it for a while. In a brisk, matter-of-fact tone, Hermione was quick to point out that, with no families to rely on, they’d have to find jobs immediately after Hogwarts. Ron’s suggestion to their problem was gambling, which resulted in an argument about morals and getting caught.

‘And so what?’ Ron said, tilting his chair back so the legs rose off the ground. ‘We can't go back anyway. It’s all gone.’

Hermione pointed out that they couldn’t be the only students with no financial support after Hogwarts. ‘Isn’t there anyone?’ she said, squinting in the glare of the sun. Their seats in the back of the library did little to escape the enormous windows. ‘Though I suppose if you truly had nothing, it would have been discussed in first-year. A trust fund would be set up or something. I remember Professor McGonagall explaining it. And I can’t think of anyone who doesn’t have a relative, or a guardian, or any sort of aid.’

‘Well, there’s Tom,’ Harry said.

At once, both Ron and Hermione’s eyes widened. They shared a look, as if Tom’s name from Harry’s mouth was deeply forbidden and uttering it would result in something awful, like an avalanche or an explosion.

‘Of course,’ Hermione said softly. ‘Riddle worked in Borgin and Burkes after Hogwarts. But I’m sure he has loads of people to rely on. With the way Professor Slughorn goes on, I imagine he’d let Riddle stay with him if he wanted.’

‘Slughorn was such a hypocrite in sixth-year,’ Ron said. ‘He’s bloody in love with Riddle, even after Riddle asked him how to cut up his soul in seven different parts.’ He chewed the tip of his quill between his teeth. ‘Do you think he went back to that orphanage every summer?’

Harry didn’t want to think of Tom in the orphanage. It was too vivid in his mind: Tom and the other orphans, grimy hands and sunken cheeks. Tom wandering the streets of London, amid rubble and carnage. A rabbit strung up on the rafters. *I can make them hurt if I want to.*

‘I asked him once,’ Harry said. ‘He went back every summer until fifth-year, and then stayed with Abraxas after that. I don’t think he’s been there since.’

Ron gave him a funny look, as though he was surprised Harry knew the information.

‘I reckon staying in Malfoy Manor isn't such a hardship. How many house-elves would you say they have?’

Harry twisted his fingers together. ‘Well, maybe. But he’s still a half-blood with a muggle surname. I’m sure the Malfoys aren’t too keen on him.’

He had gauged that before from Tom’s tone and the slightly rough way he sometimes spoke around Abraxas, as though trying to mask a vulnerability. Tom hadn’t outright said it and yet when Harry brushed the topic — *were they as awful to you as they are to him?* — he had only hummed dismissively, a faraway look in his eyes.

‘Anyway,’ Hermione chewed her lip, ‘I suppose it doesn’t matter anymore. We need to focus on our futures, not Riddle and whatever

he gets up to. He's not the threat he was before - not yet at least.'

'The minute he does something illegal and gets thrown in Azkaban, I'll celebrate.' Ron caught something on Harry's face — Harry, who felt like he had been punched very hard in the stomach and couldn't hide it — and he went on quickly. 'At least once the horcrux is gone, you have nothing preventing you from forgetting this whole thing, yeah?'

'Yeah,' Harry said.

'And when you're out of Slytherin, it will help,' Hermione added. 'You'll never have to see him again.'

Never see him again.

'Maybe,' Harry said. 'I dunno. Even though the whole thing was stupid and a lie, and he's a really shitty person … I still miss it.'

Being with Tom had been both the best and worst time of his life. He had always known it was going to end; he had always been grappling with a mixture of guilt and self-loathing. But even then, even with how wrong it had felt, nothing had ever been as fulfilling. Nothing else had been able to distract him from the pain of landing in the past; nothing had felt easier.

'Of course,' Hermione said. 'I suppose at least things ended somewhat amicably? Riddle could have tried to murder you, or make your life hell, or destroy all your possessions.'

Ron snorted. 'Great way of looking on the bright side, Hermione.'

'No, you're right,' Harry said. 'Things are alright in Slytherin. I'm bound to stop feeling shitty soon.' He smiled weakly but they both just gave him rather sad looks.

'I'm proud of you for admitting it,' Hermione said. 'And if you ever want to talk …'

'I know,' Harry said. And he did. It no longer felt so tight, so choking, so coiled deeply inside. 'Anyway, let's see that future chart you made again. I could do with a laugh before class.'

She kicked him under the table but Harry caught Ron's eye and grinned.

It was strange sometimes, to see Ron and Hermione hold hands under the table or share sappy looks when they thought he wasn't paying attention. They were so discrete with their affection that sometimes Harry forgot they were even dating. Other times it was as though they were afraid to upset him. But Harry didn't mind the fact their friendship had shifted. He didn't mind that it was *Ron-and-Hermione* and Harry. He was just grateful that it had been repaired, even if the pieces slotted together into something entirely new.

With his upcoming meeting around the corner, Professor Slughorn held Harry behind in potions' one day to tell him that his performance had notably improved. Harry didn't mention how he focused his entire being on the task of potion-making now, because otherwise he'd think about Tom. Instead, he said thanks.

When he pulled the door open and stepped into the corridor, Ron and Hermione were waiting for him. 'What was that about?' Hermione said as they made their way to the Great Hall.

'Slughorn's an awful gossip,' she said, after he explained, 'I bet he wanted you to say something about Riddle.'

Harry only hummed. The halls were empty and bright and the suits of armour were making jerky, clanking noises as they stretched their arms and flexed their fingers.

'Anyway, even if you do —' Hermione stopped.

Abraxas and Belinda were coming around the other corner, so close the five of them almost collided.

'Harry!' Abraxas said. 'What did Slughorn want with you?' Looking at Ron and Hermione, he stilled.

Hermione had turned rigid beside Harry, her arms instinctively crossing. Ron and Abraxas were looking at each other, with matching expressions of mistrust.

Harry cleared his throat. 'He was talking about my potion skills improving. I think he feels bad for me, honestly.'

'No way. He's in love with Tom. Slughorn probably thinks you broke his heart or something.'

The corridor was too quiet. Harry shifted the weight of his bag onto his shoulder.

‘Hurt his ego, maybe.’

Abraxas looked at him pitifully. ‘Are you coming to lunch?’

‘Aren’t you eating with us?’

They both turned around at the sound of Ron’s strained voice. Harry opened his mouth but wasn’t quite sure what to say. There was a frown on Ron’s face, as though the words had come involuntarily and he couldn’t take them back.

‘I should probably sit at the Slytherin Table,’ Harry said. ‘They hate me enough as it is.’

‘That’s not true,’ Abraxas said. ‘It’s just because of …’

‘You-Know-Who.’ Harry smiled apologetically at Ron and Hermione. ‘I’ll see you after?’

‘Fine.’ Hermione gave Abraxas and Belinda a rather cold look. ‘Later.’

‘What, are we not good enough to eat with Harry?’ Abraxas said. He ignored the quick look that Harry shot him — both a warning and a plea. ‘What makes you any better?’

Ron jumped in at once.

‘Well, for one thing, I’ve never tried to kill him. Though maybe for a bunch of Death-Eaters like you, that’s too high of a standard I’m setting …’

‘*Kill him*?’ Abraxas echoed.

Harry’s eyes shot towards Belinda. She was standing stiff, her mouth parted.

‘That was Tom,’ Harry interjected quickly. ‘Can you all stop bickering like babies?’

‘Weasley’s being the baby.’

‘You started it, Malfoy, you prejudiced git.’

Belinda had recovered quickly and her face was sharp. ‘Aren’t you

supposed to have him on a leash, Granger?'

'Oh, you're one to talk. Been stealing from anyone lately?'

Harry cleared his throat and they all froze.

'Enough,' he snapped. 'What is this, a competition over who's the better friend?'

'Sorry,' Abraxas said.

Belinda tilted her head. 'You jumped down our throats for no reason.'

'I'd hardly call it no reason,' Hermione said. 'But fine. It's none of my business how your friendship with Harry works.'

'Whatever, Granger. I'll talk to you later, Harry.'

Before Harry had a chance to say anything, she turned down the corridor and set off. Abraxas hesitated for a second and then followed. Their two white heads glinted in the pale light, Belinda's plait swishing. She was upset, Harry knew, from the moment Ron had mentioned murder in front of Abraxas.

Harry exhaled. 'What,' he said slowly, 'was all that about?'

Hermione shuffled from foot to foot but Ron only crossed his arms and replied, ' you can't expect us to all become best pals or something. They're *Death Eaters*.'

'Death Eaters.' Harry shook his head. 'That word has a very different meaning than it did in our time and you know it.'

They stood there awkwardly. A couple of portraits had quietened at their conversation, and when Harry looked at them, they hastily started to talk.

'Let's go eat in the kitchens,' Harry said, turning quickly from the Hall. 'I don't want to deal with the Slytherins now.'

'Alright,' Hermione said, falsely bright and loud enough that it echoed in the empty corridor. She looped her arm through Harry's —Ron gave them an amused look, though his shoulders were still stiff — and they made their way down the stairs.

'I'm not saying you have to be friends with them. But can you at least not be rude?'

They turned right and made their way down a lamplit corridor. The halls leading to the kitchens were wider and warmer than the ones in the dungeons, and the alcoves were lined with plants. They passed a babbling geranium and a vine that stretched out towards them, its dark leaves brushing Harry's chest.

'I know it's childish to dislike them,' Ron said, 'and I don't really, but I just …. I keep seeing them as Death Eaters.' He reached into the portrait of the fruit bowl and tickled the pear. The door to the kitchens swung open and a flood of house-elves came rushing towards them.

'We'll just have whatever you're serving upstairs,' Hermione said, smiling in such a way that a small house-elf blushed and ducked her head. 'Thank you very much.'

A plate of sandwiches appeared with a snap on the long wooden table. Harry amused himself with the idea that it had been lifted from the identical table above. Tom, perhaps, had reached out a hand and the plate had vanished, leaving him bewildered. A pitcher of pumpkin juice appeared with it, along with three silver goblets, bowls, and a tureen of leek and potato soup.

With a rather flustered bow (Harry, Ron and Hermione had been forthcoming with their thanks), the house-elf scampered away.

'Makes you miss Dobby, doesn't it?' Ron said. 'Even that old git, Kreacher, started to grow on me.' He picked up one of the salad sandwiches and took a bite. When he had swallowed, he added, 'I know it's different for you. You're around them so much. But for me —'he was now making for the pumpkin juice—'it's fresh.'

'Look at Abraxas — he's the spitting image of Lucius. And even the way they hold themselves, the way they stand together. I just see the robes and the masks and the pieces of shit who would happily torture us all to death. Who look at Hermione and don't even question whether she deserves to live.'

The soup was scalding and Harry winced as he swallowed it. The reminder of Dobby was painful and for a moment he lost his train of thought. 'I felt like that at the start of the year,' he said. 'I thought they were all scum and younger copies of the Death Eaters. But they're not. Some of them are bad, sure, but Abraxas and Belinda aren't. They're not entirely good —'

An alleyway. A wand pressed against his throat. The flashing

headlines of the daily prophet. The only way, the only way.

'—but who is? I'm not saying you have to be friends with them, but you don't have to act like they're Voldemort either.'

Ron placed his pumpkin juice on the table. There was a crash of saucepans from the other side of the kitchen: they all twisted around to watch the house-elves juggling an enormous pot of stew, and arguing in whispers.

'Maybe it's because they're Slytherins. I mean, the whole house is in Riddle's fucking pocket. They're these crazy sycophants who follow him, and maybe they're not that bad, and they don't follow him blindly, but it's still … it's still Slytherin, isn't it?'

'*I'm* a Slytherin,' Harry said, in a much colder voice than he had intended.

Ron glanced at him quickly. 'I didn't mean that. I meant what it represented. I'm sorry.'

Hermione hadn't touched her sandwiches. She was stirring her soup furiously, her head down as she listened to them talk. Now, chewing her lip in thought, she said, 'you're a Slytherin so you're forced to see them differently. But we don't have that yet, we haven't fully been able to separate the past and the present. I think it's quite amazing that you have. You of all people have been so affected by Voldemort and the Death Eaters, and yet you can overcome all that hatred.'

'Anyway, I know they're your friends and they don't seem too bad, really. I'm sure they're nice enough people. Especially compared to Riddle —' she caught herself and hesitated.

Harry took another scalding mouthful of soup and said, 'you can talk about him if you want. It's alright.'

She cleared her throat. 'Causing a fight was childish and petty, and we should be above that.'

'Though they were just as bad,' Ron objected.

'You're all a bunch of thick-headed gits, really,' Harry said. 'I know you were looking out for me but I don't need it.'

Ron scoffed. 'Of course not. Not with the nice, quiet life you lead.'

Harry grinned. Their conversation went to normal things: the upcoming Charms' test, their research on removing the Horcrux, the career meetings, and they finished up in the kitchens in time for class. Hermione was off to Ancient Runes — she gave Ron a brief kiss — while they had a block of free time. Ron suggested the library, but after looking out the window at the rippling expense of grass, Harry said they should go flying. The cold air and the informality of it — no Alphard yelling, no sniggering beaters, no searching for the snitch— made the whole thing effortless. They took turns riding Harry's broom and tossing around the snitch that had previously held the resurrection stone. When they finished, Harry felt lighter than he had all month.

He didn't see Abraxas and Belinda until he headed back to the common room. They were seated near one of the dying fireplaces, Belinda with her legs crossed, writing a long letter on expensive cream paper, Abraxas poking at the green flames with a rod, causing them to spark.

'Oh, there you are,' Abraxas said, setting down his poker and shuffling over to give Harry space. 'You don't hate us, do you?'

'What?'

Belinda glanced up from her letter, lips quirking. 'Abraxas is convinced you've sided with your real friends and want nothing to do with us anymore. You know how dramatic he gets.'

'I'm not dramatic —'

Harry suppressed a laugh. 'Sorry, Abraxas, but you are. You were all equally rude though. I'm not going to only forgive Ron and Hermione when you were all acting like jealous babies.'

'Sorry. But they don't like us. They obviously hate us.'

'And you made it so much easier to change that view.'

Abraxas winced. 'Sorry. I suppose I just … you like them *so much* and you've known them so long. And yet they're —'

'If you say Gryffindors, I will murder you.'

'—they clearly hate us, and I don't want you to as well.'

Harry was developing a headache that had nothing to do with his

scar. ‘You sound like Tom,’ he said. ‘Why would I do that? You’re my friends too. I mean it.’

‘Thanks, Harry,’ Abraxas said. ‘You’re not so bad yourself.’

Harry rolled his eyes and leaned his head back against the cool leather. The heat of the fire had warmed his frozen hands, and the scratch of quills and quiet conversation was soothing. It was strange how much had changed since September. Never before had he imagined considering the Slytherins his friends.

Yet it was nice.

Harry arrived ten minutes early to Professor Slughorn’s office and waited on an ornate armchair that had been placed outside. He tried not to listen to the murmur of voices coming from beneath the door. Abraxas was in there and had been for the past half an hour. Harry studied a portrait on the wall and idly thought of how Slughorn would react to the news that he didn’t want to be an Auror nor play professional quidditch. But he didn’t have long to ponder it. There was the sound of screeching chairs and footsteps; Abraxas saying thank you, his voice a lot closer than before.

The office door opened and Abraxas stepped out, pale and nodded vigorously. ‘I’ll think about it,’ he said. ‘Thank you, sir.’

Slughorn clapped his hands. ‘Good boy. Harry, do come in.’

Harry and Abraxas barely had a chance to exchange glances before Harry was stepping into the office. No longer expanded and decorated for the Slug Club, Slughorn’s office was small and lit by a brass lamp. There was a fireplace opposite the porthole window and a tall mahogany desk, stacked with picture frames, boxes of chocolates, and half-written letters. A fat stack of essays sat on the floor, along with an expensive ostrich feather quill.

Slughorn waved Harry towards the centre of the room where two burgundy armchairs faced each other. With a sigh of relief, Slughorn sat down, and Harry did the same.

‘Well, Harry,’ he said, ‘do you still want to be an Auror? I remember

you were talking about it at the club one time, along with curse-breaking, was it?'

'Yes,' Harry said, surprised that Slughorn had remembered. 'But I don't want to be an Auror anymore.'

'No? Perfectly understandable, of course. It's a gruelling path, being an Auror. Certainly a fulfilling job, but sometimes I wonder, at what cost …' he cleared his throat. 'You were thinking about professional quidditch at one point, weren't you, Harry? You would certainly be capable — out of our entire team, I say that to you most sincerely. Alphard has the determination, of course, but you? You have the talent.'

Harry smiled awkwardly. 'Thanks, sir. I do enjoy quidditch but more as a hobby. And then there's the press, and the articles, and the constant attention—'

Slughorn chuckled. 'A life in the spotlight isn't for everyone. You'd be praised, highly, I'm sure, but never able to stay under the radar. And Quidditch careers are fleeting - ten years, if you're lucky, maybe less.'

'Exactly,' Harry said.

'Well, you're doing well in all of your subjects. Professor Dumbledore speaks highly of your proficiency in Transfiguration, which is a very tricky subject, I always thought. Professor Flitwick told me you cast the most remarkable Patronus a few months ago — without any practice either. And Professor Merrythought speaks most highly of you. A bit of a Defence prodigy, she says.'

Harry smiled awkwardly. 'I like Defence.'

'But being an Auror isn't for you?'

'Not now it's not. That's all I know.'

They talked for a while about the different routes that could come from Defence. Harry could tell Professor Slughorn was trying not to suggest anything that would remind Harry of Grindelwald and the supposed life-or-death situation he had faced. Yet as they went through a long list —profession duelling, healing, working with magical creatures — Harry didn't feel deflated.

Why did he have to choose now? There was no pressure on him anymore. Harry thought that he'd be perfectly happy working in

Quality Quidditch Supplies, so long as he had a roof over his head and his friends alongside him.

‘Your subjects are very broad,’ Slughorn said, getting up and leafing through a stack of glossy pamphlets on his desk. ‘You could do anything you wanted in the ministry if you build your way up to it. Potter’s a respectable name, your grades are excellent …’ he handed Harry the stack. ‘And I’d always put in a good word for you.’

Harry, who thought this was the end of the meeting, moved to stand but Slughorn was sitting back down. ‘Think of it as a fresh start,’ he said. ‘You have an opportunity to do whatever you want, be whoever you want. If you don’t know who that is yet, then find that person first. Do you know what the difference between you and your classmates is?’

When Harry shook his head, he said, ‘*experience*. Do you know how many Slytherins came in here before you, believing they’ll end up exactly like their parents? They’re ambitious, certainly, coddled too, and not one of them has set foot outside of Britain. But you’ve had to grow up quickly, haven’t you, Harry?’

‘I suppose so, sir.’

‘I saw it from the moment you arrived. You don’t entertain yourself with the petty matters of the house; you don’t even acknowledge them. You, Weasley, and Granger — there’s something different about the three of you.’

Harry wasn’t sure what to say to that. How could he tell Slughorn about his first year in Hogwarts, when he stared death in the face? How could he tell him about the graveyard, the horcrux hunting, or the Order of the Phoenix? There was no time to be a teenager when a prophecy hung over his head; no fantasies lasted long when he read the prophet and saw another massacre.

‘Anyway, Harry, you have no family forcing you into the ministry and no responsibility that comes with being an heir. You have freedom that your fellow classmates would never allow themselves to even consider.’

‘I know, sir,’ Harry said. ‘I’m not in any rush to jump into hasty decisions either.’

‘Well, look through those pamphlets — tell me what you think about curse-breaking. Though perhaps it’s too gruelling of a career.’

Harry shrank the leaflets and placed them in his pocket. He wasn't too worried about what Slughorn said — he felt better, more hopeful, and no longer weighed down by the thought of Voldemort.

'We'll arrange another meeting whenever you want. I've told the other Slytherins the same. Though Merlin, if Tom's half as indecisive when he comes in, I'll be in trouble.'

Harry's smile slipped at the words. A second passed between them and from the way Slughorn studied him, he had been waiting for a reaction. Waiting to catch Harry out.

There was a shelf lined with bottles behind the desk. Potions, vials and flasks were stacked alongside bottles of mulled wine and mead, all of them glinting in the light.

Harry met Slughorn's eyes and said, 'don't you think Tom knows exactly what he wants to do, deep down?'

Slughorn looked away quickly. 'He wanted the Defence position anyway. He was really crushed over that. But Tom's bright. I'm sure he has some ideas.' He cleared his throat, busying himself with a stack of papers.

'He wants to test the limitations of magic,' Harry said. 'He doesn't want to discover it, but to control it. Use it as a tool. We both know Tom's more than ambitious.'

'Quite so. He's certainly —er—driven. A very dedicated boy, Tom. Perhaps it was his muggle upbringing. Maybe he thinks he has something to *prove*.'

Then Slughorn's shoulders slumped. He turned to Harry, who watched the exact moment he gave in. 'Is that why you and Tom don't get along anymore? Those paths that he could be drawn to?'

'We disagree on the important things.'

'The important things,' Slughorn repeated. And he was looking at Harry in a way Harry had never seen from him before. It wasn't quite pity — it was softer, more knowing, a look that told Harry he wasn't the only one who knew what it was like to care for Tom and have it simultaneously eat at him.

'Well, you know better than I do how stubborn Tom is when he sets his mind to it. Maybe he'll get over all those ideas in a few years. The

real world should knock some sense into him.' He attempted a wobbly smile, that didn't quite reach his eyes, and squeezed Harry's shoulder. 'You've had a good influence on him, even if you don't see it. And I've never seen Mr Malfoy or Miss Lestrange so confident. You'll go far too, Harry, mark my words.'

Harry smiled, more sincerely than he felt. He didn't argue with Professor Slughorn's belief that Tom would get over his ambitions: what was the point when it would only make Slughorn upset?

'Thanks, sir,' he said.

It didn't hurt to say aloud now. Harry no longer felt like he was being stabbed in the chest when anyone said Tom's name. He no longer wanted to curl up in shame either. It was even sort of nice, in a strange way, to know that Slughorn wanted something different for Tom too.

When Harry stepped into the hall, he had expected Tom to be waiting outside, had been bracing himself the entire meeting for the fleeting moment when their eyes would meet. But the halls were quiet and dark, and after thanking Slughorn once again, Harry went on.

He thought of what Tom had said before. How Harry wouldn't be satisfied with a quiet, ordinary life, or even know what to do with it. Was it true?

Harry stuffed his hands into his pockets and went up the stairs. The pamphlets were smooth against his fingers, the wand cold. On the third floor he turned, the thoughts quickly disappearing. He straightened up and said the password —*cauldron cakes*—his mind suddenly clear.

Dumbledore pulled open the door and gestured Harry inside. He was wearing a scarlet nightcap and the office was cast in the orange glow of a lamp. 'Harry,' he said, waving his hand so the armchair across from his desk sprang out. 'How are you doing, my boy?'

'I'm good,' Harry said, and it was no longer the lie it had once been. 'I've been meaning to talk to you about something I discovered.'

'Discovered?' Dumbledore straightened his half-moon spectacles and leaned forward. There was an empty cup of tea on his desk, the leaves forming an indecipherable clump at the bottom.

Harry looked at them, and then the pinprick of stars out the window,

and the tartan pattern of Dumbledore's nightcap. The wand was in his pocket, steady, cold, a myriad of possibilities.

He looked back to Dumbledore's face, to those pale blue eyes, and said, 'it's about the horcrux.'

Empty Vessel

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is a bit angsty and has some psychological torture and some mild descriptions of gore. So heads-up for that.

The Room of Requirement was lit only by candles. Tall, white, and ghostly, they flickered despite the absence of a breeze. In the centre of the room, Hermione kneeled before a circle of chalky runes. She muttered under her breath occasionally, never lifting her head, but though she had been working for hours, only half of the runes emitted a weak, reddish glow.

Standing a little apart from her, Harry and Ron didn't speak. Ron was alternating between reading the same three pages of text and watching Hermione's progress raptly. Harry was unable to stop touching the Elder Wand in his pocket.

It had been two weeks since they had found the book. Two weeks and the ritual was finally ready.

Harry's muscles were tense and twitching. Walking back and forth across the room did nothing except make Hermione snap at him, and Ron to inquire if he 'still wanted to go through with this.' So Harry only played with the wand, trying to keep his mind clear.

It was a ritual Ron had found in '*Magick of the Mind and Body.'* At first, it had seemed like another dead end. The Restoration Ritual was used to rid a wizard of a dark curse when magic otherwise failed. In the peeling pages of the book were depictions of blood curses, parasites, and drawings of wizards writhing in agony.

'It won't remove the horcrux,' Hermione said at first. 'And look at this —the amount of magical energy required to sustain the ritual can cause the caster to succumb to their curse more quickly if it isn't a success. And it usually isn't. There are only two accounts of it being successful. A witch who was dying from a blood curse managed to rid it from her body. And the other one is very strange. A child who was supposedly possessed by a demon — some sort of dark creature, I'm presuming. And while the ritual worked, again dubious at best, the child never performed any magic.'

'Well, maybe they were a squib,' Harry said. 'Are there any accounts

of the ritual having dangerous consequences? Apart from magical exhaustion?'

There weren't. While the ritual had only shown successful results twice, the negative ones weren't as nasty as everything else they had found. Magical exhaustion was the main one, depicted in every account they found. Magical exhaustion, Hermione explained, was much more deadly for someone fighting off a curse. The sapping of power meant the wizards were unable to fight their sickness any longer. Most of the attempts resulted in death mere days later.

But as Ron pointed out, everyone who performed the ritual was dying of a dark curse. It was a wonder they had the energy to begin it at all, with their magic being eaten away. No-one had completed it because it required a constant chain of power to feed off —a chain that Harry hoped would come from the Elder Wand, rather than himself.

'You're not removing a curse though,' Hermione pointed out. 'You're trying to remove a horcrux, the foulest and darkest piece of magic in existence. It's going to take a *lot* of magic to destroy it. And what if it turns on you?'

They had talked it through with Dumbledore several times, and by their fourth meeting, he resignedly said it was the best ritual they had come across. 'But it's dark,' he warned, 'and dark magic always requires something in return.'

'Your soul and the horcrux fragment have been interwoven for seventeen years. Separating them may not be possible, not without stripping away the very essence of yourself.'

Harry had to reassure an anxious Hermione that he wasn't going to push himself beyond the limits of magic, and if it felt like his soul was being torn apart, he'd find a way to stop.

Now, as they stood among the flickering candles, those words were echoing through his head. *He'd find a way to stop.*

'You don't think because it's a horcrux, the ritual will make it stronger? Wake it up or something.' Ron's voice was weak and sudden. It was the fourth time he had said something along those lines and each time, Harry had mumbled something about the horcrux being only a small part of him and not large enough to take control. They had destroyed horcruxes before, why would this one be any different?

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘But either I try and destroy it or we give up.’

They were quiet again. Harry watched one of the candles from the corner of his eye. It was flickering, its flame so weak that even a slight change in air pressure would snuff it out.

When Hermione stood, the candle died.

‘It’s finished,’ she said, dusting off her knees. ‘We should begin now while the runes are at their most powerful.’

Harry and Ron jumped up. Unable to fully look at each other, they moved forward to see the rune circle. It was large enough to fit ten people and the runes were glowing red. In the centre was a cross with three symbols branching out from it —symbols Hermione said were for protection.

‘I think it’s all correct,’ she said tentatively. ‘Some of those runes I’ve never heard of before, but they look the way they’re meant to. I’m almost certain they’re correct.’

Harry turned from the circle to her pallid face. ‘I’m sure it’s right, Hermione. And even if it’s not, and something happens, it’s not your fault. It’s my decision to do this, not yours.’

‘And it’s *you,’* Ron said. ‘Merlin couldn’t have carved those runes better.’

Her smile was weak. ‘Anyway, Harry, I think you should begin, unless you’ve changed your mind. Good luck.’

‘Thanks,’ Harry said, and determined not to show his uncertainty for his friends' sake, added, ‘I have the *Elder Wand* to tap into. There’s never been a better chance of destroying this thing.’

He unbuttoned his cloak and tossed it aside. Hermione caught it mid-air, folding it neatly, and then sprang forward and wrapped him in a hug. ‘I really don’t want you to die,’ she said to his neck. Her whole body was trembling.

‘Me neither,’ Harry said. ‘And unless something goes really, badly wrong with the horcrux’—he squeezed her shoulder—’it’s going to be fine.’

He and Ron awkwardly hugged each other. Ron’s face was so pale that he looked ill, and giving Harry a curt nod, he studied the floor.

‘I’m not mad at you anymore,’ he said suddenly. ‘For any of it.’ His smile was horribly forced. ‘Good luck, mate.’

With the Elder Wand in his hand, Harry gave them a final look and stepped forward. He had imagined that walking over the glowing runes would produce a feeling of heat but it was like stepping into icy water. The hair on the back of his neck rose.

Magic was all around him. It seemed to hang in the shadows of the room, to brush against his cheek, to fleet and dart and dance, and buzz with expectancy. Harry’s skin tingled and he suppressed a shiver.

Trying not to focus on the way it vibrated around his hands, he told himself this was precisely why they had chosen the Room of Requirement. It was a structure created entirely by magic; a room that was charged for what was yet to come. Without looking back at Ron and Hermione, Harry raised the Elder Wand.

Diffindo.

A great slit stretched across his palm, glistening in the low candlelight. Before any of his blood could spill, Harry pressed his hand against the rune in the centre of the circle. There was a cold sensation—something seemed to travel through the wound, right to his core — and the circle flared to life.

Harry stepped away quickly. Heat licked at him from every angle. The runes were aflame: high, rising flames, that made everything outside the circle hazy. It was impossible to know if Ron and Hermione were calling him. A hissing was starting up in his ears, low and rattling, and the Elder Wand began to vibrate.

Harry held it firmly. Despite his instincts, despite the fact he could no longer see his friends, he didn’t fight back. He closed his eyes.

His body buzzed. Magic was swirling around him. It was fingers in his mind; fingers probing his insides, searching, reaching, tightening and coiling. And despite how much Harry’s skin crawled, despite how much he wanted to swat the magic away and resist the invasion, he gave in.

The temperature dropped. When Harry opened his eyes, the flames had disappeared and it was so dark he was unable to see.

‘I am ready,’ he said, pulse hammering in his throat. ‘Use the power of

this wand, offered willingly, to destroy the affliction within. Use this circle, painstakingly carved, to render it impotent.'

Harry's chest was starting to feel tight. The more he spoke, the more his teeth clenched.

It sounded ridiculous. Why was he doing this again? There was nothing more he wanted — nothing that felt more natural — than stopping.

'Use this body, a worthy vessel, to supply the magic required to carry out this extraction.'

Teeth clenched, Harry gritted out the words. If the ritual was testing his will, then he wasn't going to stop because it hurt.

His forehead glistened with sweat.

'Animus fragmentum,' he gritted out. The Elder Wand was buzzing so strongly it was difficult to keep aloft. 'Perditus aternium.'

The pressure disappeared.

Swaying on the spot, he gasped. Colours danced before his eyes and his mind reeled. While it no longer felt like his magic was being squeezed from his body, there was something heavy resting over him, something final.

He steadied himself and looked around. Through the darkness was the faint reddish brand of the runes, finally sealed off.

There wasn't any time to investigate them. Harry had barely caught his breath when the air began to stir. The Elder Wand grew cold in his hand and his stomach dropped. In the corner of his eye was a shape — sharp and fleeting— but when he turned around, it vanished.

He raised the wand. *Something* was there, he could feel it. Something that made his skin crawl, his ears prickle.

… *Harry.*

A spark shot involuntarily from the Elder Wand. Harry jumped, swung around, and met only shadows. He blinked for a second in bewilderment, unable to make sense of what he saw.

The air was spiralling — faster and faster, a tornado of darkness. The circle of runes faded away. The room was no longer there. There was

only magic rushing through his ears, magic flooding the air. Cool, rushing magic, that was steadily draining him.

Half-hunched over, Harry gasped. Just another minute, he thought, and it would have enough magic to draw from. Another minute and the ritual would work. Another minute and it would be destroyed. Another, another —

...we'll be destroyed, you mean, Harry. You and I are one.

Even with the compression, even though it felt like his insides were being boiled, Harry recognised the voice of Voldemort.

Still hunched over, he gripped the wand.

Or are you still trying to deny that little fact?

Laughter, like wind rustling through trees. High, rattling laughter that went down his spine, in his ears, echoed through his head.

Harry straightened up and stared into the darkness. It was difficult to be sure he was still in the Room of Requirement. The air was charged. Everything was *cold.*

Why wasn't it working?

He reached with the Elder Wand and touched his scar. It was like putting his hand through smoke — dense, fleeting, the room swam and shifted...

And it was perfectly clear.

He stood in a bedroom. The sound of the body hitting the floor was dull and distant, and when he turned and saw her — a shock of red hair fanning the floor, vacant green eyes—he stepped over the body and towards the crib.

The baby wasn't crying but watching him, curious. Small hands were wrapped around the bars of the cot; a lower lip trembled.

And he lifted the wand and pressed it to that smooth forehead. Pressed it so hard it left a mark, a scar, the skin splitting. *Curious,* he thought, and with a flash of green light they were one. Light, and colour, and something like crying but he wasn't sure where it was coming from.

This was wrong, wrong, wrong —

‘You’re not a vessel for me, Harry. You *are* me.’

The sibilant hiss of Voldemort came from within. Harry stared down at his hands, pale, slender, and long-fingered. Nice hands. Tom’s hands. He’d recognise them anywhere.

And yet the faded marks still blazed: I must not tell lies, carved into him irrefutably.

‘Every decision, every choice, is influenced by us. You may as well remove your own conscience.’

Was it true?

The voice was low, horribly intimate. Harry raised the Elder Wand and the horcrux laughed.

‘*Our wand won’t work with this. Don’t I yield it too?’*

The room lurched.

He was no longer in the bedroom of Godric’s Hollow but surrounded by fog. White mist swirled all around him, thick and impenetrable, pressing in from each side. It was difficult to step forward. Every movement was like wading through cement, but he persisted, knowing it had to end somewhere, that there was always a flaw in the illusion.

Where was the end of the rune circle?

There was a mocking sound —familiar in a way he couldn’t pinpoint — and a thought popped into his head, a wild, fleeting thought.

And just like that, he was staring at himself.

A solid, identical Harry stood a little distance away, its fingers splayed, watching the shadows ripple through them. It raised its head and looked at him expectantly.

'Do you want to see what we're like without it?'

Harry didn’t say anything.

The voice was the same but the expression on the figure’s face was so alien that he almost didn’t recognise himself. Its grin was grotesquely stretched, its eyes wild and mocking.

The other Harry reached up and brushed back its fringe in the exact

same way Harry did; the other Harry lifted an identical Elder Wand, eyes still locked on him.

'Wait –' Harry began, involuntarily taking a step forward. It was too late to prevent it.

Other Harry smiled and said those words. Liquid was pouring from its scar —his scar —dark, crimson liquid, gushing forward, almost hitting Harry in the face.

He watched his own eyes roll backwards, fingers sink into his forehead as if trying to tear out his brain. The white gleam of bone, fingers caked with blood, and other Harry wouldn't stop, clawing and clawing …

With a wheezing noise, it fell to its knees.

'It's like a dementor's kiss in a way,' it choked out. 'We don't die. We don't live.'

And then it made a noise —a high, screaming noise; a noise so inhuman that Harry's hair stood on end; that he backed away quickly, tripping, tendrils rising from the ground and coiling around his feet.

'You'll be a shell.'

Harry spun around and froze. The voice was an electric shock; the figure, tall and dark-haired, smiled at his reaction.

'Your friends will kill themselves with despair over it. They'll try to find a way to fix it, but how can you fix something you've essentially killed? That's what this is, Harry. *Suicide*.'

It wasn't Voldemort who rose from the cauldron in Harry's fourth year. Nor was it the waxy figure that had split his soul seven times; Tom Riddle from the diary; the monster who came to his house that fateful night.

It was Tom.

His Tom.

Harry's chest squeezed.

Tom looked exactly as he had last seen him. He was wearing his Hogwarts robes, his tie perfectly in place. His Head Boy badge was pinned in the way he always wore it, and his hair was loose and

falling over his forehead.

Harry hadn't seen Tom slick it back in months.

'You don't want to do this, Harry,' Tom said. 'It's because of me, isn't it? What I said?'

'Even imaginary, you're as arrogant as ever. Not everything revolves around you.'

Tom's smile was small, amused, horribly genuine. 'This does. It's not because you're disgusted by the horcrux. It's because you feel powerless.'

'You'd say that, considering you *are* the horcrux. Do you actually think this will work?'

Harry felt like his body was slowly being sapped of everything. It was harder to hold onto the Elder Wand, harder to remain upright, to resist.

Tom — solid, smiling, lovely Tom — only tilted his head. 'But you're not powerless, Harry. This — *us* — is power. You think the horcrux means you're tied to me, but it goes both ways. Tom has dreams too. Have you ever asked him if his head hurts?'

Harry didn't answer. The horcrux wanted him to doubt, and to use the opportunity to gain control.

'Wasn't it even sort of nice sometimes, to share that? You could always tell what he was feeling…'

'*Nice,'* Harry spat. 'I suppose for you, maybe.'

'But removing the horcrux won't make it any easier. In fact, you won't be doing very much at all.'

That horrible, knowing smile.

An image flashed before Harry's eyes. His crumpled form, knees curled into his chest, eyes blank, rocking slowly back and forth.

'Funny, isn't it,' Tom said, and Harry jumped because the voice was right at his ear. 'Seeing yourself?'

'You're not real,' Harry said. 'None of this is real.'

‘I’m every bit as real as you.’

Invisible lips brushed his ear. Harry flinched but Tom was standing opposite him and the expression he wore made Harry’s insides twist. Tender, soft, and earnest: the easiest mask Tom could wear.

‘You don’t want to do this,’ the horcrux said. ‘You’ll be giving up everything, to prove I mean nothing to you.’ And Tom was looking at him — words soft and reverent and almost loving. ‘You don’t mean nothing to me.’

‘Stop,’ Harry snapped, recoiling backwards like he had been struck. He knew the wand wouldn’t work; Tom was no more real than a dream and yet—

‘You love me, isn’t that what all of this is about? You think by severing it, by killing this part of yourself, you’ll be able to let go. Things can go back to *normal*. You can pretend this never existed, that it was all because of the horcrux, the prophecy, the killing curse.’

The horcrux’s eyes were steady. Tom’s face was bright. His tone painfully intimate.

‘But it doesn’t work like that, Harry. It was never forced, or fated, or down to our connection.’

A hand reached towards him — hovered, an inch between them.

‘Do you want me to say it?’ the horcrux asked.

No, no, no, no.

‘Because I love you too.’

Harry couldn’t move. It was the very worst thing the horcrux could say, the cruellest, and it went through him like a knife. He stared at Tom’s perfect, lying face, and everything swam.

‘It’s not going to work. It’s not …’

He stepped backwards. Tripped. The air was heavy around him. His insides were starting to burn.

‘You’re not real.’

‘You can say that all you want, but I’m part of you. I am you. Do you think you can ever be free?’

There was an edge to the horcrux's voice: gleeful, taunting, a voice that almost sounded wrong coming from Tom's mouth now.

Harry wondered if he was starting to lose it.

Sweat dripped down his forehead. His entire body trembled. He lifted a hand to wipe his blurry eyes and they came back sticky. The mist around him shifted.

'Do you think you can hide from it now, with no consequences? You've only made things worse. Because of you, Voldemort will be much worse than before. Your very presence here has created a monster.'

The floor shifted. He was falling, falling off the Astronomy Tower, off a cliff-top, screams ringing in his ears. His heart jumped into his throat; he clutched the wand...

Block it out. Block it out. He's not real.

'Your life is a lie. Everything you stand for, everything you believe in, has been stripped away. You're *nothing* and all you've ever caused is pain.'

Eximento, Harry thought.

Clear your mind.

'You killed Sirius Black. You stood there and watched Snape kill Dumbledore. You ruined Ron and Hermione's lives. How can you even look at them, knowing you took away everything? They'll never be happy. They'll pretend, of course, but deep down they'll always resent you for what you did. They'll hate you for it.'

The image of Tom was contorting; his eyes blazed red, his skin started to stretch, his hairline peeled back.

'Even your parents,' Voldemort said, 'were twenty-one when they had to give up their lives for you. Do you think they'd be proud if they saw you? If they knew the things you've done?'

Harry sank to his knees. Voldemort was no longer a figure, but a voice rattling in his ears. Magic whipped around him. *Clear your mind, clear your mind, clear your mind.*

Heat was licking his insides. He shot out a hand desperately but only

grasped shadows. And it hurt, it hurt as nothing had before in his life … his head was ablaze … his bones were folding in...

'But you'll always have me,' the horcrux said. It was Tom again, and the voice was soft. Even listening to it dulled the explosion in his head. Tom was looking at him like he loved him, but he didn't, he couldn't, never, never, never …

'Give in,' he coaxed. 'And everything can go back to normal. It's not too late.'

There was an urgency to the voice now, sharper, desperate.

Harry clenched his teeth. It took so much effort to keep the image from appearing before him.

Tom. Tom. It was right. It was the truth. It was all he had.

'You can't make it go away, Harry. You can't ever be rid of this.'

Harry gasped. Behind the rattling voice, behind the screaming in his ears, was a muffled shout. Blood was pouring down his forehead. His head was being compressed, squeezed from every angle, stabbed at with white-hot needles. He couldn't see, couldn't think …

'*Give in.'*

The voice was distant. There was only pain. It was everywhere, it was too much, it was killing him, it was –

Gone.

Harry convulsed on the floor. He couldn't see anything but that hardly mattered. He was floating, warm, light in a way he had never felt before. So wonderfully light.

'Give in.'

Harry clenched the Elder Wand so hard it almost snapped. *Eximento*, he said under his breath.

Block it out, block it out, block it out.

There was a loud whistling in his ears. Everything burned. His mother's face swam before his eyes, white and glassy; he had a distant image of Ron —Ron, his best friend, leaning over him, and then a high thin scream. Something gave out inside him, something broke, the

world sparked and spun and shattered, and there was pain again, so much pain.

Clear your mind, clear your mind, clear your —

He woke to a shimmering ceiling of light. Flat on his back, Harry became aware that there was something cold pressed against his face. He reached a hand out towards the pulsing blobs of colour, but it felt like he was trapped under a great weight. Pain rippled up his arm and he dropped it at once, groaning.

'Harry?' a voice said. 'Are you awake?'

He recognised that voice. Harry sat up with a wince, and Ron came into focus. He touched his scar which was swathed in bandages and his fingers came back red.

‘Here,’ Ron said, and placed Harry’s glasses on his face. The world sharpened and he saw that the shimmering lights were candles.

‘Did I pass out?’ he asked. His throat felt strange; scratchy and hoarse, the words unfamiliar.

‘Just for a couple of minutes,’ Ron said. ‘Hermione’s gone to get Dumbledore. They should be back any minute.’ He moved forward carefully. ‘How do you feel, mate?’

Harry met his concerned eyes. ‘Like I’ve just been beaten up by Hagrid.’

Ron snorted. ‘You’re okay though? You don’t feel like you have no soul or something?’

‘No, I …’ Harry stopped and looked at him. ‘It’s done.’

‘Yeah, and it only took you almost dying to do it. What *happened* in there? It was all going fine and then you …’

‘What?’

‘You started convulsing.’ Ron’s voice lowered. ‘You looked like you were being *tortured.* And your eyes rolled back, and you were

screaming, and Hermione and I came forward but the runes had sealed off. We couldn't stop it without everything going horribly wrong, so we just had to watch … we had to watch…' his voice broke.

'Sorry,' Harry said. 'It wasn't meant to go like that, but the horcrux put up a fight. Remember when you destroyed the locket?'

Ron grimaced. 'It was like that?'

Harry didn't say anything.

He stood up, legs almost buckling, and touched his scar. With the heavy gauze, it was impossible to feel the pulse of the horcrux. And yet somehow, he knew it wasn't there. It was something about that last scream …

'The blood was black before,' Ron said. 'And your eyes were red. What happened?'

'The horcrux was trying to convince me to stop. Showing me things, saying things …'

He picked up the Elder Wand, which was lying on the floor beside him and frowned. The carvings in the wood blazed golden. Pressing his finger to the pattern, Harry felt a dull warmth.

'What do you reckon that's about?'

Ron shrugged. 'Maybe the amount of magic you cast affected it somehow? Or since you've destroyed the horcrux, you're officially the Master of Death and have activated it.'

'Maybe,' Harry said and looked past the Elder Wand to the rune circle. '*Woah.*'

'Yeah, it's been like that since you passed out,' Ron said. 'A bit more extreme than the book showed, right?'

The runes were silver, like the textbook said they would turn. Stretching out from them, spreading the distance of the room, was a charred black stain.

Harry leaned forward and touched the wood — it was fever-hot, like it had been burned, and the usually smooth surface was splintered.

'How do you feel?' Ron said quietly. 'Your scar's still bleeding.'

‘Fine,’ Harry said, and he looked at Ron for a moment, at his pale, nervous face. ‘Thanks for being here.’

Ron shrugged. ‘You know I won’t let you do crazy, life-threatening things alone. Are you sure you’re okay?’

Before Harry could answer, the door opened and Hermione came forward breathlessly. She spotted Harry and rushed towards him.

‘Oh! You’re awake! How do you feel?’

Behind her was Dumbledore — Dumbledore whose eyes went first to Harry and then slowly around the carnage.

‘I’m fine,’ Harry said, and Hermione was hugging him, muttering about how scary it had been, how stubborn he was, how glad she was that he was okay.

‘The ritual worked,’ she said, her voice a mixture of giddy disbelief and shock. ‘The runes turned silver like they were supposed to do. And the book said there’d be a small explosion, but well’—she waved a hand at the stain—'*that* happened. I think your wand did it. Something erupted from the end of it, and you crumpled to the ground and you were bleeding *so much*. We were so worried.’

He squeezed her arm. ‘I suppose they were right about the magical exhaustion.’

Harry couldn’t go to the Hospital Wing after what he had cast (the matron, while friendly, would be obliged to report the heavy use of dark magic to the headmaster), and so Dumbledore cast several spells to evaluate his health, paying particular attention to his scar.

It wouldn’t heal over by magical means but that was expected; Harry already knew dark magic was sometimes impossible to heal, and he hadn’t expected it to be different with the horcrux.

Dumbledore said that when Harry’s magic was stronger, his scar would heal naturally. He gave him a blood-replenishing potion, along with one for the pain, and said to report to him at once if it got any worse.

To keep everyone from staring at his forehead, Harry patted down his fringe. He didn’t want to go back to the common room with gauze over his scar, but the alternative was blood dripping down his face, which he knew would freak everyone out. He also didn’t want to see

Tom.

At one point, when it was just the three of them, Hermione had tentatively asked if he felt differently about Tom now. As he walked back to the common room, Harry knew he didn't. It wasn't strange to admit. It was something he had already accepted, something he knew would never change.

When he reached the dungeons, the effects of the magic Dumbledore had cast were still in place. While his scar was wet through the bandage, it didn't hurt. Everything was numb. Harry made his way to the dormitory, ducked into the bathroom and stared at his reflection.

It was gone.

He peeled back the bandage. His scar was blazing, blood-slick and standing out like someone had carved into it with a knife. He grabbed the nearest towel, soaked it under the tap, and pressed it to his forehead.

It was finally gone.

Harry hadn't expected to feel any different, but the shock was fading — now he felt strange and weightless; detached from his body, dizzy with relief.

The bathroom door opened and he froze.

'Tom,' he said, towel still clutched to his head, heart starting to thunder.

He felt woozy. Distant.

'Sorry,' Tom said. 'I didn't know you were here.' A small frown crossed his face. 'Does your scar hurt?'

His voice was so stiflingly polite that Harry's chest squeezed.

'A bit.'

They looked at each other for a moment and Tom moved towards the doorway. Before leaving, he paused. 'I'm sorry about your …'

He was across the room so fast Harry barely had time to flinch.

'Why's it bleeding?'

‘It’s fine,’ Harry said quickly. ‘It’s nothing.’

Tom’s face shifted. ‘Harry,’ he said very quietly. ‘What did you *do?’*

His expression made Harry flinch. He hesitated, wanting to spare Tom, to make his face go back to normal, to do anything except deal with that naked horror.

Tom looked like Harry had slapped him. Like he already knew, deep down, what Harry had done.

‘I removed the horcrux. That’s why it’s bleeding.’

‘Are you —’ Tom swallowed. He was as white as the porcelain around him, his eyes locked on Harry’s forehead. ‘Are you fucking serious?’

‘I …’

It didn’t matter that it wasn’t a part of Tom, or that it was none of his business. At the expression on his face —at the dazed, wide-eyed shock —Harry almost said sorry.

‘I told you I wanted it gone. So I did it.’

‘How?’

Tom ran a hand through his hair, taking a step back. ‘How aren’t you dead? What — why –’ He froze. ‘You have the Elder Wand.’

‘What?’

‘Your magic has been weird for months, I can feel it. And Dumbledore hasn’t performed magic in class all year. Usually, he’s always waving that thing around, showing off how great he is.’

Tom stepped out of the bathroom and Harry quickly followed. Still clutching the towel to his forehead, Harry expected him to search for the Elder Wand at once. Instead, Tom paced the dormitory like an angry animal and turned to him, eyes wide and accusing.

‘How did you do it?’

Harry hesitated and pressed the towel a little harder against his scar. ‘I used a ritual.’

‘What ritual?’

‘Does it really matter what ritual?’

‘Yes! Do you have any idea how dangerous that is? How *stupid?* Do you have any fucking idea*?’*

‘You’re one to talk. How many times have you split your soul again?’

‘You could have died!’ Tom yelled.

Harry stilled.

There was silence for a second but Tom didn’t close off like Harry thought he would. He only continued to stare, in that flat, disbelieving way. ‘How could you … I mean, you actually …’

‘I’m sorry,’ Harry said.

‘Do you want to have nothing to do with me so badly that you’d risk your life over it? Is that it —you’d rather *die* than be stuck with a connection to me?’

‘It’s not about you,’ Harry said. ‘It’s not even your horcrux. It’s this piece of dark magic that’s caused me a lifetime of misery. It’s a piece of Voldemort — a disgusting fragment of his soul right after he killed my parents. I’m not doing it out of spite. Just because you’re obsessed with that stupid horcrux, acting like I’m a fragment of you —’

‘I don’t think that.’

‘—oh, please. You’ve even said it. You don’t care about anything but yourself and you never have.’

‘Whatever,’ Tom said. ‘Cut up your head all you want. You mean *nothing* to me.’

‘Good,’ Harry said furiously. ‘Maybe now you can get on with your life and stop pretending I’m a vessel for your soul.’

‘Weren’t you though? You were so obsessed with getting rid of it …’

‘Probably because I hate the sight of you—’

The towel hit the ground with a wet slap and Harry’s legs buckled. Half-bent over, he staggered, black spots blooming before his eyes.

‘Harry —’

Harry forced himself to stand up straight. It took enormous effort: there was nothing more desirable than sinking to the floor, letting his eyes close, and giving in to the blackness.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Fine?’ Tom scoffed. ‘You can barely stand. You’re bleeding all over the floor.’

‘Since when do you care?’

Harry staggered towards his bed and siphoned the blood away from his scar. He didn’t even care that it was the Elder Wand and Tom was watching him. He was too angry, too hurt, too drunk with pain.

‘What ritual did you use?’ Tom said again. His voice was flat and hollow. He wasn’t staring at the wand but Harry’s scar and the blood siphoning away.

‘It was a restoration ritual. To—er—get rid of a parasite through dark magic.’

‘And you just’—colour rose in his deathly pale face—'you just risked your life? What if it took your soul instead? Clearly, it was feeding off your magic to work. You didn’t sacrifice a life, you didn’t ...’ his voice was slightly strangled. ‘You don’t even know how badly that could have backfired.’

‘Well, it didn’t. So can you leave me alone? And don’t even *think* of touching my wand, Tom, I fucking mean it.’

‘Don’t die in your sleep,’ Tom said coldly. ‘That would be such a pity after all the stupid things you’ve done to yourself.’

Harry’s teeth rattled. His skin had broken out in goosebumps and Tom’s words made him shiver.

‘Isn’t it funny,’ he said, as Tom watched him with that furious expression, ‘how I removed the horcrux — your beloved piece of soul — and you didn’t feel a thing?’

Tom flinched. He looked disoriented: wide-eyed, disbelieving, still staring at Harry’s scar.

‘Please just go,’ Harry said. ‘We can talk about this later. Or not. I really'—his teeth were chattering—'I really want to go to sleep.’

The dazed look vanished from Tom's face and he blinked. 'Fine,' he said, suddenly cold and composed. 'I hope you enjoy the nightmares.'

But before Harry could answer — before he could ask what the hell that meant— Tom ducked out of the room and closed the door.

Harry's whole body trembled. He took off his glasses, hands shaking, and tried to create another bandage to wrap around his scar. His wand refused to work no matter how hard he focused, and eventually he gave up, crawling under the blankets and yanking his curtains closed.

He shivered violently. His body protested at every movement, and he clutched the Elder Wand, knowing he wouldn't be able to protect his trunk in this state.

Would Tom try to steal it?

Come into Harry's bed and prise it from his hands?

It wasn't something he could comprehend right then. He was *cold* and his eyelids were so heavy. He closed them and images flooded before his eyes.

Voldemort. His mother. Tom in the dorm. Tom, pale and stunned. Tom's expression. His words. All of it burned into his brain.

Harry pressed his fingers to the cold scar, searching for a pulse. *Nothing*, he thought, dizzy with relief. *Nothing.*

The images swam as he drifted off. They circled back to Tom, always Tom, and the possible aftermath to follow. But even in his muddled state, Harry's last thought was that it was over.

He no longer carried a remnant of Voldemort. He was no longer a horcrux. And despite everything else, that thought was comforting.

The ritual was finally complete.

Aftermath

Harry slept fitfully. Dreams came in waves of heat, hyper-vivid and lurid. His friends' faces swam accusingly before him. They morphed into inferi: cloudy-eyed, skeletal limbed, with damp, mossy skin. Ron opened his mouth to reveal a single tooth, and before Harry could back away, he lunged toward him, all grimy nails and sores. Harry was being dragged into the lake, beneath the stagnant surface, choking, thrashing …

And he was staring at a pale-faced girl. She had dull, muted eyes: dead eyes, and yet still she watched him. 'I killed him,' she said slowly. 'I had to. My sister said.'

Harry looked at her, and then around him in horror. Smoke was rising from the floorboards. They were in the Shrieking Shack, and his wand was in his pocket. His wand, his wand —

But he had given *Tom* his wand. Tom, who had asked so nicely. Harry would give him anything, anything at all. He grabbed Claudia, trying to pull her through the rising flames, but she kicked him, fought with him, and heat was licking his insides, a fire alarm was roaring in his ears.

He watched her go under, those dead eyes staying open until she was engulfed by flames. With a strangled noise, he swung around.

'Harry!'

Tom was fumbling for something, reaching into the flames. Harry ran towards him and saw the diary, shrivelled and blackened and pulsing in and out. Fire blazed between them and Tom moved towards it, stepping into the heat. A noise rose in Harry's throat, a cry. Tom was burning … still climbing into the fire...

'It's my soul, Harry. Why did you destroy my *soul?'*

Harry looked down, dimly. Two red blazing lumps: his hands, aflame.

With a gasp, he jumped up, reached into the light, skin on fire …

Nothing.

His t-shirt was sticking to his back and his heart thundered. It took a moment to realise he was in the dorm, and another to remember he

hadn't actually killed Tom. Blankets were tangled around his feet and sweat poured down his forehead. He had woken twice like this already, only this time the dorm was bright.

Harry kicked aside the blankets and stumbled to his feet. He was still holding the Elder Wand, the handle damp in his hand, and blazing golden. He stared at it dazedly and staggered to the bathroom. His scar, at least, had stopped bleeding. Splashing his face with water, Harry clutched the basin until the dizziness faded.

He remembered now.

After Tom had left, he had been overcome with a fit of vomiting. Abraxas, who had found him leaning over the toilet, had brought him a pepper-up potion and conjured him a clean bandage. He had been so frantic — so fussy, and anxious, and pale — that Harry had told him mostly the truth. He had performed a dark ritual and his magic was drained.

Groaning, Harry closed his eyes. His mouth still tasted stale. He could feel his heart pulsing in his throat, a jerky, uneven rhythm. He forced himself to brush his teeth and splash more water on his blisteringly hot face. Knowing it was futile, he attempted to stitch his scar.

The stitches dissolved the moment they came in contact with it and the attempt at magic made him double over. He leaned there until the nauseous feeling passed.

Why did he still feel so disoriented? So feverish?

It took an enormous effort to get dressed. He had to force himself not to crawl back under the blankets and instead to think of how worried Ron and Hermione surely were. And what if the Slytherins decided to inform Professor Slughorn of his mysterious illness...

When Harry eventually reached the common room, he slumped into the closest armchair, away from the heat of the fire. Snatching up the nearest book to look busy (*Witch Weekly, Valentine's Edition*), his eyes unfocused. Everything —the students, the armchairs, the blurry pink pages —was covered by a fine haze.

'Can I sit?'

Harry straightened up and nodded. As Belinda sat down across from him, he stifled a wince.

‘How are you feeling?’ she said. ‘I heard you did a ritual on your scar.’

'Yeah,' Harry said. She was studying him closely, though her face was impassive.

'Does it hurt?'

'It's fine.'

His scar itself didn't hurt. The rest of him did. His entire body ached as though he had been kicked all over.

'What did it do anyway, the ritual?'

Harry hesitated. 'It was to remove the dark magic that resided in my scar. It was causing me headaches and stuff.'

She studied him for a second. 'Well, did it work?'

'Yeah.' Her eyes were lingering on his forehead but he didn't pull back his fringe. 'It worked.'

Harry couldn't tell her about the horcrux, even if he felt guilty. Belinda may have known about the future, but the horcruxes were *Tom's* secret.

Harry’s stomach twisted.

'Well, maybe you should take the week off classes,' she said. 'You look really flushed. I'm sure Slughorn will come up with some excuse for you.'

Despite the fact she was wearing a navy dressing gown, her hair bunched atop her head, Belinda looked better than Harry had ever seen her. While her face was as unreadable as ever, her posture was no longer guarded.

'How are things with your family?' Harry asked. He pressed his hand against his scalding cheek, but it provided no relief.

'They're better. Claudia wrote to me yesterday. Aunt Aubrey is forcing her to learn knitting. But hey, at least it's not a Boggart, right?'

'I'm glad,' Harry said and Belinda's smile was genuine. They talked for a few minutes about her sister and Belinda’s voice was so fond that Harry couldn’t help but smile. He leaned back, grateful that he only

had to listen to her stories and not talk about his scar.

Abraxas made his way through the entrance.

'You're up,' he said. He dropped onto the sofa opposite Harry, practically squashing Belinda. 'I thought you were going to die.'

'You thought I was going to *die?'*

But for once, Abraxas didn't blush.

'You didn't see it. You were bleeding everywhere. And you weren't making sense. You kept talking about Ron Weasley, and your wand, and how you'd upset *Tom*. This —not your *bleeding head*—was what you kept going on about. And I couldn't take you to the Hospital Wing after what you bloody cast. You'd be expelled.'

Harry frowned. 'What time was that?'

'It was around three. You were fine earlier — we were talking, remember? You really freaked me out, to be honest. And then you just went back to bed, as though nothing had happened.'

'Yeah, well … that's magical exhaustion, I suppose.' He rubbed the back of his neck. 'Was everyone awake?'

'No, it was only me. We were in the bathroom.' He frowned. 'You don't remember any of this?'

'Not in the slightest,' Harry said. 'But that's probably for the best.'

'For the best,' Abraxas repeated faintly. 'Do you feel better now?'

Abraxas and Belinda were both staring at his forehead, too polite to ask for what they both wanted. But he ignored it. He wouldn't — *couldn't*—show them the scar. It was hot, itchy, and it had taken so long to conjure the bandage.

'Is breakfast still on?' he asked. Eating, as undesirable as it sounded, would hopefully help with the dizziness.

'Yeah.' Abraxas sprang up. 'We'll come with you.'

Tom lifted the cover of his diary and traced a hand over the first page. Smooth and cream, the paper wasn't marred by a single blot of ink. After preserving the diary in fifth year, everything he had written in it faded. If he wrote now, the words would sink into the pages and his own fifth-year self would respond. A whole half of his *soul* resided in that thin, black book. A book that proved — above everything else — that he was special.

He had stolen it while wandering around London. Filthy, in ill-fitted clothes, his hair cropped short the way Mrs Cole required. The word *orphan* had hung over him like a cloud of smog.

Tom pressed his hand to the cold paper, discarding the memory. Half of his soul resided among those pages and he felt nothing. He closed the diary and set it aside.

Harry's horcrux —the one that had never been a part of Tom's soul, never meant anything at all—had been different.

He had felt it between them. A connection. He had been able to sense Harry's emotions, see through his eyes, even into his *dreams.* And maybe it had gone both ways, but Tom hadn't even cared that much. They were connected in a way that went deeper than magic; that travelled through time, through history.

And now it was gone.

(Harry had almost killed himself to get rid of it. That's how much he loathed a part of Tom being a part of him).

He shoved the diary carelessly into his trunk. Nothing, is what Harry thought of him. Nothing. Harry wanted to sever all ties with Tom. *Forever.*

He reached Harry's trunk and spent a minute reversing the locking charms. They were weaker than normal and he broke in easily. The wand wasn't in the trunk. The Elder Wand, which he could never take, not without Harry hating him forever; not without causing a complete mess.

What he found instead were books.

Magick Moste Evile… Blood Curses of the Fifteenth Century... Foulest Fiends...

Tom's teeth sunk into his bottom lip. He didn't know if he wanted to

laugh or smash something. Harry had a library's worth of dark magic in his trunk and Tom had known nothing about it. It was maddening, it was *intriguing*, and above all else, it stung.

He sorted through the books, picking out several that he hadn't read before (they most likely came from the Lestrange family library), and after taking them, he felt slightly better.

It wasn't The Wand, it wasn't nearly enough to ease the sting, but it was something.

In the Common Room, he twisted the Gaunt Ring around his finger. He should have known Harry would find a way. Stubborn, reckless Harry, who made Tom's insides *burn* with betrayal … Harry, bleeding all over the floor, clutching that towel with its growing red stain...

'Did you see what Harry did, my lord?'

Tom twitched in annoyance.

It was Abraxas, and while he stood a metre away from him, he didn't flinch at Tom's venomous glare.

'To his scar?' He laughed. 'Oh, I saw it.'

It was hard to not let the bitterness creep into his tone. Abraxas hesitated, stepping a little closer, and said, 'do you think he needs to go to the Hospital Wing? If we told Slughorn what happened, he wouldn't get expelled. But he's …he's …'

'I don't have all day, Abraxas.'

'He's in a really bad way.'

Tom looked back at his ring. He had seen Harry in the bathroom, unable to stand. The mess he had made of his forehead. The blood everywhere. *Good.*

'Well, that's his own fault, isn't it?'

Abraxas didn't say anything.

Tom twisted the Gaunt Ring. He needed to find a hiding place for it, somewhere Harry would never find. And yet, parting with another piece of his soul felt wrong. Here it was, on his finger, so easy to steal …

‘What’s wrong with his scar anyway? I researched dark curses but there’s nothing that makes sense. He was in pain *all the time.* That sounds serious.’

Tom’s eyes snapped up. ‘What did you just say?’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean —’

‘What did you say about *Harry,* Abraxas. About his scar hurting.’

He froze. ‘Well, it’s always like that, isn’t it?’ A nervous titter. ‘But it didn’t make sense how it got so much worse. Last month, he was practically wincing every day. I thought it was the after-effects of a curse, but what curse does that? He’s had the scar for years, apparently. And…’

Whatever he saw on Tom’s face made him hesitate.

‘It’s only recently become bad.’

‘It’s always been bad,’ Tom said. He didn’t want to ask —he didn’t, he *didn’t.*

‘Explain.’

‘Well, he hides it most of the time, so I never actually know. I found him throwing up down the toilet once —what sort of headache is that bad? Or he goes and lies in the dorm with the lights off, like he’s having a migraine. He can’t even speak. Apparently, no medicine works. Something about it being a cursed scar, and dark magic …’

He shuffled from foot to foot, not meeting Tom’s eyes.

‘He seemed a bit better this morning, though. I really thought he was going to die last night. Rituals can do that, can’t they? Become dangerous after?’

A muscle popped in Tom’s jaw. He barely resisted the desire to take out his wand and curse Abraxas. Idiotic, anxious Abraxas.

Tom wanted to kill him.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ he said, in a voice he didn’t recognise. ‘He’s been *vomiting* over pain in his scar, and you didn’t think I’d want to know?’

‘Well, I —I—’he swallowed. ‘I’m sorry, my lord, I know you and Harry

aren't on the best of terms —'

Tom's eye twitched.

'—and you're never around when it happens. I thought you already knew, I'm sorry.'

Tom stood so suddenly that Abraxas flinched.

'Forget it,' he snapped. 'The bloody thing's gone now, isn't it?'

Abraxas gaped.

The common room was nearly empty and Tom clenched his fist hard, trying to tamp down the rage. He didn't know where it was coming from or why he wanted to smash something. Why he wanted to shake Abraxas' shoulders until he told Tom *everything* he knew about Harry, every conversation they had ever had, every tiny detail of his life.

'Sorry,' Abraxas said quickly. 'It's only, you haven't spoken in months. I thought you'd like the fact his head hurts.'

Tom felt like he had been electrocuted. He looked at Abraxas, who was inching away from him, and wasn't sure what he was going to do. Abraxas' head was bent submissively. His shoulders were hunched, his throat bobbing.

'Leave,' Tom said quietly.

'My lord —'

'Just go! Do you *want* me to curse you?'

'No, I...' he didn't finish the sentence. He backed away, across the common room and through the entrance without looking back.

Tom collapsed into the armchair.

I found him vomiting down the toilet. He couldn't even speak.

It was like Veritaserum being forced down his throat; he clenched his jaw, squeezed his fist, bit hard into his cheek.

He wanted Harry to suffer for what he did. He *wanted* him to, so why did it bring him no satisfaction?

Bile crawled up his throat.

He had left Harry in the dorm, so sick he could barely speak. He had known what it would be like. The nightmares, the fever, the illusions. The mangled mess that was his scar.

I really thought he was going to die.

Tom's skin itched. A month ago, the thought of Harry suffering would have filled him with relish. Now, he was possessed by something stronger than rage. Something that blocked out the sting of betrayal; something bone-deep, gnawing. It was worse, much worse.

What good was distance? Denial?

His rib-cage tightened.

Harry had destroyed Tom's horcrux. Harry hadn't even *told* him. He didn't want Tom anymore; he'd rather die than have to speak to him. He didn't care, he didn't care, he didn't…

Tom twisted the Gaunt Ring hard. His fingers were trembling. A muscle was pulsing in his temple.

He had almost died.

As the day wore on, every part of Harry's body throbbed. It was difficult to walk without wincing, and every time he lifted his arms, he felt that ripple of pain. In order to avoid the dungeons, he stayed in the Room of Requirement with Ron and Hermione. They were sceptical of his drained expression and he didn't dare tell them about the night before. Instead, head heavy and eyelids pulsing, he listened to them talk about the ritual.

'Did it try to manipulate you?' Hermione asked, and the curious note in her voice couldn't be fully disguised. Even though they wouldn't judge him, Harry couldn't tell them what he had seen.

'It was like the other horcruxes,' he said. 'Desperate. Sneaky.'

As the day wore on, his temperature fluctuated. Hermione said this was his magic trying to repair itself and he should go and rest. Deciding to accept this suggestion —she looked so anxious that he couldn't bear to be around her anymore —he staggered back to the

dungeons.

Hopefully, Harry thought, slumping in the boys' bathroom and closing his eyes, *the dorm would be empty.*

His teeth chattered. He leaned against the sink, hot, dizzy, and when he touched the scar again his fingers came back sticky.

Harry faltered.

His scar was bleeding again, bleeding so much the gauze he had wrapped over it was soaked through. He carefully peeled back the bandage and pressed a lump of toilet paper to the wound.

What the hell was wrong with the stupid thing?

He couldn't go back to the common room like this.

Wincing, a hot blob of light pulsing before his eyes, he lifted the sopping paper, fumbled for his wand, and vanished the blood.

A lance of pain rippled through his arm, so intense Harry bit down on his lip. Spots swam before his vision and a tiny noise escaped his throat. Wrapping the bandage back around his scar, he stumbled from the bathroom.

The dungeons seemed like the other side of the castle. Several times he stopped and grabbed the wall to steady himself, closing his eyes as the world blurred. Then —not caring about the common room or who was in it—Harry made his way to the dorm. He muttered in parseltongue to the door, collapsed on his bed, and gave in to the hot throb of pain.

It could have been hours or minutes. Harry's skin crawled. Goose flesh broke out on his arms and his teeth rattled. He lay there, shivering, blankets up to his chin and heard the door open with a rumble.

Harry didn't open his eyes. 'Is that you Abraxas?' he said, half-muffled by the pillow. 'Do you have any of that blood replenishing potion left?'

Then —heart spiking—he remembered. He had *locked* the dorm.

'It's not Abraxas.'

Harry jolted upwards with a wince. Tom was standing in the doorway, a strange expression on his face. If Harry didn't know any better — if

he didn't feel so dizzy and feverish and cold—he would almost think Tom looked nervous.

'Oh.'

He straightened up and cleared his throat. 'The dorm was locked,' he said, patting down his hair. He bit his lip when he brushed the scar.

'And that's probably the stupidest thing I've ever heard.' Tom stepped into the room. 'Was your plan to lock yourself in here and die?'

'I'm fine.'

'Fine?' He scoffed. 'You look like shit.'

Harry didn't respond. His scar was bleeding steadily and every movement hurt. He closed his eyes to end the conversation — hoping, weakly, that Tom would disappear when he opened them.

'Harry.'

Harry's eyes flew open. The voice was close: Tom, at the edge of his bed, staring at his freshly stained pillowcase. He was blurry, unfocused —for half a second Harry almost reached out to make sure he was real.

'Was Dumbledore not able to heal your scar?'

Harry shifted a bit. 'It's too dark. He says it will stop bleeding when my magic readjusts.'

Tom nodded. He was still staring at the pillow. Then, in a voice that was ever so stiff, he said, 'do you want me to do it?'

Harry hesitated, sure he had misheard. 'How can you…'

'Do you have any idea how much dark magic I know?' His eyes snapped up. 'I can fix it.'

Harry shifted back against the headboard. He didn't want Tom poking around his scar. He didn't want him going anywhere near him while he couldn't defend himself. But pain had softened the edges of his restraint and everything was fuzzy. It was something about Tom's expression, about his chalk-white face, his dark eyes, that made him hesitate.

'Alright,' he said. 'But it doesn't hurt.'

Tom ignored this. He moved a little closer and sat on the edge of Harry's bed.

Harry stopped breathing. 'Tom,' he began, swallowing thickly. None of this made sense. 'About yesterday —'

Tom's face tightened. 'Forget it,' he said.

'No, we can't forget it. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I—'

'Don't,' Tom said. Before Harry had a chance to respond, Tom brushed back a piece of his hair, leaving the scar on display.

'It's bleeding so much,' he said, eyebrows furrowed.

Harry's heart was thundering. The brush of Tom's finger against his skin was electric and he held his breath, trying not to lean into the touch.

'Oh god.'

'It's not that bad,' Harry tried.

'Have you *seen* your scar? It looks like someone aimed a cutting curse at your face.'

'Well, I did remove a horcrux I had for seventeen years.'

Harry watched Tom carefully but while his face tightened and his frown increased, he didn't say a word as he brought his wand to Harry's face.

They both hesitated.

Woozy from blood loss, unable to stop shivering, Harry felt his heart freeze. The Elder Wand was in his robe pocket, and if Tom tried to disarm him, he'd have no way of fighting back. He tried to straighten up, to look less sickly and weak, and caught the way Tom's hands were trembling.

In the dim light of the dorm, Tom's face was cast in shadows. He was so close Harry could count all of his eyelashes; reach out and touch if he eased forward a fraction. The wand between Harry's eyes was poised in expectancy, and carefully, Harry nodded.

'Sanatus,' Tom said.

Harry winced as the light struck him in the face. It was cool—unbearable against his skin —and quickly fizzled out.

‘Tergeo,’ Tom tried. The blood siphoned away and he frowned. ‘Can I … I have to —'

‘It’s alright,’ Harry said. ‘It doesn’t hurt.’

Tom ignored him. He pressed his finger to Harry’s scar, making him freeze. Woozy, disoriented, the brush of skin made his insides flip. Tom’s hands were wonderfully warm and Harry tried desperately not to lean into the heat.

‘You’re burning up,’ Tom said. He wasn’t quite looking Harry in the eye. ‘Esarcius,’ he said under his breath. With his other hand, he pointed his wand at Harry’s scar. ‘Confervo.’

Tom’s magic was cold and smooth as it burrowed into the wound. Harry's skin itched; Tom’s face was so blindingly close that he felt light-headed.

‘Hold still,’ Tom ordered. Eyebrows furrowed in concentration, he cupped Harry’s jaw, positioning his face in place.

Harry shivered. He didn’t dare breathe now, or focus on the way the touch felt. He couldn’t think of Tom’s hands or the fact they were on his tingling skin. It made the entire room spin, and that painful rotting ache to grow in his chest; the one that wanted to burrow into Tom’s skin, crawl on top of him, never let him leave.

‘Why are you doing this anyway?’ he croaked out.

There was no way to lean away from Tom. No way to escape it except to close his eyes.

Tom shushed him. He continued to murmur under his breath, a drawn-out incantation, until the itch in Harry’s scar became sharper and the lights that flashed before his eyes burst and fizzled out.

‘It’s not going to disappear,’ Tom said. ‘But I’ve stopped the bleeding.’

Harry blinked away the colours before his eyes. Tom had released his chin and shifted backwards. Sitting mere inches away, he looked as lost as Harry did.

There was blood on Tom’s fingers —*Harry’s* blood —and that same

blood was probably on Harry's jaw from the way he had cupped it. Harry's pulse hammered in his throat. Tom was so close he could practically feel the ghost of his breath. If Tom would only lean over him again, only move a fraction closer, break that tiny gap...

He was so close that Harry's eyes flickered to his mouth.

Both of them paused.

Harry's head was fuzzy. Tom hadn't so much as breathed near him in weeks, and here he was, inches away, on Harry's bed. Here Harry could pull him forward, feel the hot press of his skin, his lips, those fingers that would cup his jaw again.

'Thanks,' Harry said hoarsely. He looked away quickly but the moment lingered.

Tom swallowed. 'Did you use magic today?' he said, shifting further down the bed.

The *bed.*

Harry shuddered. He was so dizzy he seemed to be floating and Tom's face was lovely and earnest and furrowed with confliction.

(He could kiss that crease between Tom's eyebrows. Press his finger to one of those maddening cheekbones. Draw him closer and press him flush against him, down into the sheets and —)

'I had to,' he said. 'It was bleeding everywhere.'

'You actually used magic.' Tom shook his head. 'Of course you're a mess.'

'It was just a vanishing charm.'

'You're magically exhausted. *Just a vanishing charm* has stripped away whatever healing your body has undergone. No wonder you're in such a state.'

Harry was too tired to listen to Tom and looking at him made everything hurt. What he wanted most —in the most pathetic way of all—was to pull Tom down against him and lie there, pressed against the weight of his body, until he didn't feel so cold and dead anymore.

'Do you think I messed up the ritual?' he asked instead. 'I know the horcrux is gone but… why wouldn't it stop bleeding? Why do I feel

…'

He trailed off and shivered.

'You've been casting magic all day,' Tom said. 'And what did you use to fuel the ritual? *Yourself?'*

When Harry nodded, his eyes widened.

'Well, obviously you're half dead. Your magic has to recharge. I'm surprised you can even function.'

Something about his expression made Harry shift. It came to him dizzyingly. They were sitting on his bed, and Tom had healed his scar, and he was still frowning, his jaw set.

'I'm sorry about yesterday,' Harry said. 'I didn't mean what I said. I don't hate the sight of you. And I'm sorry for freaking you out about the horcrux.'

'You didn't,' Tom said stiffly.

'Well, still. I didn't do it because of our connection either. Obviously, that's awkward now, but the dreams weren't so bad. I actually sort of liked them. But you don't understand what the horcrux means to me.'

How to explain Voldemort? The way it felt to wear that locket every day? And the way it would always remind him of the night his parents died? The man that had killed them, forever a part of *Harry*?

'So you risked your life removing it.'

'I didn't risk my life.'

'Your magic then. Your soul. You can't just do that. You can't nearly *die* and not tell me.'

'I'm sorry.'

Tom was still too close. Harry wanted to tell him to leave but couldn't handle the thought of it actually happening. He swallowed the lump in his throat, running his hands over the blanket.

'I didn't mean to upset you.'

'You didn't *upset* me.'

He said it so venomously that Harry almost laughed. But Tom's expression stopped him. Feeling like he was being stabbed repeatedly in the chest, Harry watched Tom sit there.

'What did it feel like removing it?' Tom said abruptly.

Harry faltered. 'It was painful. It felt like my soul was *tearing.* And it put up a fight. I saw…'

He hesitated.

'I saw the night my parents died but the memory was wrong. And I saw all these scenarios of how I would be left once it was removed. Empty. A husk. Soulless. And I saw you.'

'Me?'

'Well, it was the horcrux. Though I suppose it was a version of you, in a strange way. And it said …' he shifted. 'It said all sorts of things to make me stop. And then it was all just pain, really. I suppose the horcrux *died* and I passed out.'

'Passing out is normal,' Tom said. 'I passed out after the horcrux rituals too. But the rest …'

Harry imagined it and swallowed.

'Don't do any magic for a few days,' Tom said abruptly. 'You won't feel worse than you do now, but you'll still feel like shit. Your temperature will fluctuate as your magic tries to stabilise itself. If you take a sleeping draught you can speed up the healing process a lot — you will still have really vivid dreams though. It's best to accept them and not take a dreamless sleep potion, in case it interferes with your magic.'

'Vivid is one way to put it,' Harry said, his lips quirking. 'Was it like that for you too, when you made the horcruxes?'

'Yes. I used a death to power it though, so it wasn't too bad. My magic was messed up for a week though. I pretended to have scrofungulus.'

'You didn't,' Harry breathed. 'Did you have to go to the Hospital Wing?'

'I'm pretty sure the Slytherins thought I was already *there*. I stayed in the Chamber mostly.'

Harry must have pulled a horrified face because Tom frowned.

‘What’s wrong with the Chamber?’

‘It’s —’ he choked back a laugh. ‘Come on, Tom, it’s not exactly comfortable. It’s freezing, and it smells weird, and there’s loads of dirty water and creepy bones.’

‘It doesn’t smell weird.’

‘That’s what you're defending? The *smell*? What about those funny plants then? Or the basilisk?’

‘What’s wrong with the basilisk?’

He shook his head. Tom’s factual tone was oddly soothing, and leaning back against the headboard, Harry smiled.

‘You’re ridiculous,’ he said.

He stared at the shiny buttons of Tom’s robes, unable to focus on the curve of his mouth. His head was swimming too much and he didn’t trust himself to look at Tom when he was like that.

‘I should probably go.’

Tom was staring at Harry, just as intensely as Harry had tried not to stare at him. Harry’s throat caught.

‘That’s probably best.’

‘Because this is over,’ Tom said, and it hurt even more to hear it come from him.

‘Exactly.’

But Tom paused, as if waiting for a cue. And possessed by a desperation he couldn’t explain, unable to help himself, Harry said, ‘can we talk about the wand?’

Tom’s face flickered. ‘What about the wand?’

‘It’s mine,’ Harry said. ‘I know you want it. Obviously you want it, but you can’t have it. I will snap it, Tom, don’t think I won’t. And I will *hate you.’*

‘Don’t you already hate me?’ he said wryly.

‘You know I don’t. I want to but I can’t. God, you have no idea …’

He licked his lips. In the darkness of the dorm, his head throbbing, his thoughts thick and unfiltered, it was hard to not say something he would regret.

‘If you take the wand, I will never speak to you again. I swear to god, Tom, this understanding that we have will never come back. I will *despise you* for the rest of my life.’

Tom didn’t move.

Harry had nothing to defend himself. Nothing apart from his word, the conviction in his tone, and the painful eye contact he refused to break.

Tom didn’t say anything for a long moment, didn’t do anything except look at him as if gauging his sincerity.

‘Alright. Unless we get in a real duel in the future and I win, the wand is yours.’

Harry’s mouth was dry. ‘That’s fair,’ he said. ‘But I don’t know about your odds.’

Tom ignored him. He traced his hand over an imaginary crease in the blanket, right near Harry’s knee.

‘Your magic’s changed. Even with the holly wand, it’s different.’

‘Yeah, that’s because of the —er—other hallows, I think.’

‘Being the master of death.’

‘Yeah, *that.* Which has nothing to do with living forever, by the way.’

Tom glanced up in a poor attempt of seeming unbothered. It was so different to how they usually regarded each other: so formal and stiff and detached.

‘It affects my magic,’ Harry began. ‘And I think it will be different now, after the ritual. The wand feels more natural.’

He explained the capricious nature of the wand and how it felt to wield. As he spoke, Tom asked about a dozen questions and watched him raptly.

‘Does your other wand still work?’ he said eventually.

‘Yes. I thought removing the horcrux may have changed its allegiance but it’s still the same as ever.’

‘That’s good,’ Tom said. ‘Holly wands are faithful like that.’ He folded the cuff of his robes, dusted imaginary lint off his knees and said, very casually, ‘can you still speak Parseltongue?’

Harry looked away.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Do you want to try?’

‘Alright.’

Tom shifted forward. Harry didn’t breathe.

‘Can you understand me?’

The relief was like nothing he had felt before. Harry almost laughed. ‘Yeah,’ he said back. ‘I suppose because it’s a language, it’s different. I can remember it.’

They gazed at each other for a long moment and Harry swallowed the burning lump in his throat.

‘Thanks for fixing my scar, Tom,’ he said. He felt sicker than he had moments ago. Sicker than he had all evening. He pulled his eyes away from Tom with effort and forced down that hot, painful thing in his chest.

‘I’m going to get some sleep.’

Harry’s fever broke in the night and he woke up sweaty. By the end of the weekend, his muscles no longer ached every time he moved and the nightmares eased to distant, swimming things: a hand in the darkness, a muted face. He even attempted magic and managed to successfully summon his belongings without feeling sick afterwards.

Mid-week, Harry could perform magic in class. Ron and Hermione relaxed when they saw the state of his scar (freshly healed, pink and closed-over), but Harry couldn’t tell them what had really happened.

The day in the dormitory with Tom was fuzzy. For a wild second, he almost convinced himself it had been a dream. Feverish, muddled, the colours lurid and pronounced—why would Tom heal his scar anyway? And why would Harry tell him all those things in return? He had been so sick that it almost made sense.

But Tom hadn't spoken to him in a week, and when they did run into each other it was so awkward that he was left with no other option: it really *had* happened.

By the end of the week, Harry could bear it no longer. Knowing it was an awful idea, and unable to help himself, he watched Tom work in potions.

Tom wasn't looking at him. He chopped his ingredients deftly, sending them into his cauldron with a neat flick of his wrist.

'We should talk about last week,' Harry said.

Tom stopped chopping. From the corner of his eye, Harry watched him pause and felt his traitorous heart leap into his throat.

'What about last week?' Tom said, not bothering to glance over. 'Nothing happened.'

'I know nothing happened,' Harry said. 'But how can you — you can't just … aren't you mad about the horcrux?'

Tom's jaw tightened.

'It's gone,' he said flatly, measuring doxy eggs and tipping them into his cauldron. 'What do you want me to say?'

'Oh, come on, Tom. You usually have no bother saying whatever the hell you're thinking.'

'Fine. Of course I'm mad about it. It makes me *sick.* You could have died, and you don't even think I deserve to know.' He broke off. 'Anyway, forget about it. It's over.'

His voice was so cold that Harry froze.

'Tom,' he began, but Tom wouldn't look at him, despite how his jaw was set, his nostrils quivering. 'I'm sorry for not telling you about the ritual. But I don't regret doing it. I wanted the horcrux removed but it'—he cleared his throat— 'it doesn't change anything.'

Tom ignored him.

As the class continued, he didn't turn away from his potion. Harry watched him rather hopelessly from the corner of his eye and wondered why he bothered to try at all. It was over and it always would be. It didn't matter if Tom cared about him; that every part of him was tense. If anything, the sting of betrayal should have made it easier to set aside —and yet, when class ended they stepped into an empty room in silent agreement.

'Go on then,' Tom said, leaning against one of the desks in an exaggerated display of ease. 'You're clearly dying to explain how you're right.'

The room was stale-smelling and covered in dust. Harry closed the door and turned on the light. He watched Tom warily, fingering the wand in his pocket, and paused.

'I didn't say I was right. I …'

It was so hard when Tom was looking at him with that impassive face. Unlike the dorm, blurry and dreamlike and hazy with fever, the statements he made were no longer deniable.

Harry cleared his throat. 'Anyway, you didn't have to heal my scar, and you could have disarmed me so … thank you.'

His magic was better now. He carried the Elder Wand along with his holly wand, a comforting weight in his pocket.

Tom shifted. 'As far-fetched as it may seem to you, I don't want to see you die.'

'It's not far-fetched.' He crossed the classroom, leaning against one of the nearby desks. 'I don't want you to die either. Even with your horcruxes, even with everything, I can't stand the thought …'

He trailed off.

Why was it so *difficult*?

He couldn't think of anything that would adequately express the twisted clump of emotions Tom produced inside him; he couldn't think of anything, except the one thing, the thing he could never say.

'Look,' Harry began. 'I know I removed the horcrux. I *had* to remove it

and it wasn't because of our connection.'

'You didn't have to,' Tom said. 'You wanted to.'

'You just don't get it. I didn't do it because of you.'

'Well, Voldemort is hardly an excuse.' He scoffed. 'You can't just sever something that also affects me and pretend it's yours to do.'

'The horcrux didn't latch onto *your* soul, Tom, so I'm pretty sure I can.'

'It clearly recognised my soul though. Or have you already forgotten about the dreams?'

He said it mockingly, lips curving upwards, and Harry clenched his fist to avoid arguing back.

'You can't grasp the thought of Voldemort. You think it's nothing, and I get it, because you weren't there. You saw a few of my dreams, a few nightmares, but you don't know what it was really like. You can't *see.'*

Harry stuffed his hands in his pockets. The classroom was thick with dust and there were several desks between them, casting long jagged shadows.

'Show me then,' Tom said.

Harry swivelled around and stared at him. 'Show you?' he repeated, 'you mean —'

Tom raised his eyebrows. 'Your memories. Your *reasoning*. Unless you're lying.'

They locked eyes.

Tom's arms were crossed. He watched Harry steadily, waiting for him to look away.

'Fine then. Do it.'

'Really?'

'What, are you all talk now?' Harry moved forward and pulled out a chair. Tom, pausing for a second, sat down opposite him.

'You'll let me use legilimency on you?'

‘Yes,’ Harry said, laying his hands flat on the table. ‘But you see what *I* show you. Nothing else.’

He swallowed at the thought. Wide-eyed, Tom waited. He was leaning forward in his seat, fingers drumming against the table.

‘Alright,’ Harry said, before he took it back. He thought of clear skies and mist and nothing at all. ‘Go.’

Tom didn’t get out his wand or say the incantation. Like a gentle gust of cold air, he was in Harry’s mind. With a swoop, Harry felt his presence. Tom’s magic was everywhere at once —buzzing, dancing, a featherlight brush of energy—and just as intense as the Elder Wand had initially felt to wield.

Harry thought of Quirrell and the moment he stepped through those black flames. He thought of the moment his turban had unravelled, slowly, in layers, and the spike of pain that went straight through Harry’s scar.

He thought of the beginning.

When it was over and Tom left his mind, Harry paced the classroom. He wasn’t sure how long they had sat there but the room was darker than it had been before and his head felt like someone had sieved through his thoughts, stripping them away. His memories were closer to the surface than he felt comfortable with: his life, playing out, hyper-vivid before his eyes.

For a long moment neither of them spoke.

Tom watched him pace, expressionless. Then, as Harry twitched with restless energy, he said, ‘I didn’t know about Malfoy Manor.’

Harry shrugged.

There was nothing to tell Tom that he hadn’t seen. Harry had shown him all his experiences with Voldemort; the ministry and Death-Eaters, the figure rising from the cauldron. Voldemort in the Riddle House. The Death-Eaters swarming Hogwarts; the cruciatus curse like white-hot needles; Sirius falling slowly behind the veil …

‘Yeah, well’—Harry rubbed the nape of his neck—'now you know.’

The only thing Harry hadn’t shown Tom was the horcruxes he had created once before. He had shown him everything; allowed him into his mind and to leave it bare.

Tom drummed his fingers on the tabletop and stood up. ‘You know I don’t want you to suffer, right?’

‘That’s sweet of you.’

‘Shut up, Harry. I mean, I don’t … I don’t want you to be miserable *at all.* I would never do any of the things Voldemort did to you.’

‘Well, you’d have to try first. I’m not fourteen anymore.’

Tom ran a hand through his hair. He was very pale and fidgety, and when he did speak, it was to say, ‘was he really that *weak*?’

‘They were my memories.’ Harry shrugged. ‘I’m sure others would be different.’

Tom sat and said nothing for a while. His face was white and his eyes were distant. ‘Thanks for showing me,’ he said eventually.

‘How else would you know every detail of my life?’

Harry smiled weakly but Tom didn’t answer.

He was staring absently at the chalkboard, thick with a sheet of dust. ‘I’ve wanted it for so long, Harry. It’s everything I am.’

‘It’s okay,’ Harry said. ‘I understand.’

He couldn’t live with Tom if he became Voldemort; he couldn’t live with himself for watching it, allowing it — so why did it have to be so hard?

‘No, you don’t. You don’t know what it’s like. I don’t want to become Voldemort like he is in your memories. He’s weak and pathetic, but I still want’—he grimaced—'*power.’*

‘I didn’t show you to change your views, Tom.’

‘But it’s different now. I don’t want that.’

‘Yeah, you want to be worse.*’*

‘I want what I’ve always wanted, Harry, but I wish… I’d almost …’

Harry’s mouth was dry. Worse than torture, worse than denial, was the fact that Tom cared.

‘We can’t work this out,’ he said, resisting the desire to reach out and touch him. He put his hands in his pockets and managed to keep his voice steady. ‘I don’t want you to give up everything you want. I can’t stand the thought of you having to lie, and pretend, and always wish things were different. I want you to be happy, but when that involves murder and pain then I can’t … I can’t pretend it’s okay.’

Tom swallowed. ‘It’s a shame I don’t have normal aspirations, isn’t it? Why don't I want to become a damn Healer or something?’

Harry choked out a laugh. ‘Yeah, that seems plausible.’

He attempted a weak smile but his face was stiff and everything hurt more when they weren’t arguing.

‘I’ll see you around,’ Harry said eventually.

There was silence for a second. Tom stood, the sound of his chair painfully loud as he pushed it under the desk. The distance between them was small and Tom’s face was shutting off. Harry watched him straighten up. Smile.

‘Bye, Harry,’ he said, and he paused in the doorway, nodded and stepped out of the classroom.

His footsteps were soft and Harry listened until they faded away. Then he sat back down in the empty seat and listened to the rhythm of his own pulsing heart. He touched his scar, faint and pink and final, and closed his eyes.

Choices

Tom drummed his fingers against the desk. He had finished his work half an hour ago, but Dumbledore was still going around the classroom, making small talk with the students. It was an easy class, a break from the usual note-cramming, and Tom itched with the desire to leave.

Seated on his left, Avery was poking his matchstick to no avail. It was more likely to explode than turn into the owl that Dumbledore requested. Tom's owl — a great grey, sitting primly on a silver perch — was scowling.

Massaging his temples, Tom suppressed a sigh.

'My lord,' Avery began, his voice low. He glanced around urgently. 'He's coming over here. Can you — what do I need to —'

It was too late. Professor Dumbledore was at their table, his pale eyes sweeping over Avery's matchstick (there was a long, yellow claw bulging from the end of it), and Tom's owl.

'Impressive work, Mr Riddle,' he said. 'I imagine if you owned that owl you would have no need to shrink any more parcels.'

Tom didn't smile. The owl was watching Dumbledore with yellow eyes and at the words her wings rustled outwards, so wide that Avery dove out of the way to avoid being slapped in the face.

'I'd like to talk to you after class, Mr Riddle, if you don't mind staying behind a few moments.'

Tom's face didn't betray any emotion. He met Dumbledore's eyes — just what did he want?—and nodded curtly. 'Of course, professor.'

Why couldn't you have died, you stupid, miserable old —

'Ow, what the hell! The bloody bird *bit* me!'

Avery clutched the tattered sleeve of his robe, his eyes wide and accusing.

Absently patting the bird's feathers, Tom shrugged. 'Dumbledore probably upset her.'

‘Yeah, he’s upset me a bit too. What does he want with you?’

Tom’s eye twitched. He gave Avery a cold look—a look that said *mind your own business*—and Avery paled.

‘I’m sure it’s nothing, my lord, it doesn’t matter. I’m sorry I —’

Tom blocked out the rest of the prattle. He turned in his seat, lazily scanning the rest of the room.

Harry was on the other side of the classroom with Abraxas. He leaned forward as he listened to Abraxas speak, a feat which took immense patience. Abraxas liked to prattle on, taking ten minutes to say what required a dozen words. He lost his train of thought easily, and his nonsense always gravitated around his father, paintings and quidditch.

Tom played with his wand.

There was a screech owl and a snowy sitting on their table. The snowy was walking around the table, eyeing them curiously, and Harry gently petted its feathers.

He was no longer the sickly green colour he had been after the ritual, and the glassy look was gone from his eyes. He looked better —better than he had looked in weeks, all messy-haired and smiling —and Tom turned away.

The sound of Abraxas’ voice was grating. The lazy way Harry grinned was even worse.

It was *hell.*

And in his mind, unable to disappear, the memories played like a tape. They hadn’t spoken since Harry allowed him into his mind —they hadn’t done anything much, except share occasional looks when they thought the other didn’t notice—and yet Tom’s mind was unravelling.

The visions had infected him. It would have been a new sort of punishment for Harry to inflict, too twisted for him to consider.

The high, wavering voice of Voldemort. The mutated form in the blankets. His face — he could still recognise it, which was the most horrifying thing —waxy and stretched. Even at his best, even in the ministry, Voldemort was pathetic.

‘My — my lord?’

Avery still hadn’t managed to create a convincing owl. A bald, miniature chicken was waddling around their table, and Tom’s owl eyed it as if it was a weasel.

‘He’s looking over here again.’

Tom’s eyes fell to Dumbledore, who, having successfully circled the room, stood behind his desk.

Tom looked down at his tightly balled fist and relaxed his hand. He met Dumbledore's eyes steadily, and after a second, a moment of intense eye contact, Dumbledore turned.

Something —a desire to please his professors that he couldn’t quite get rid of; a perverse curiosity he couldn’t mask—made Tom linger behind in class. The owls were gone and feathers littered the room. Avery’s monstrosity still scampered around their desk, clucking and cooing and attempting to fly.

Tom packed his bag slowly, letting its screeches fill the silence.

‘Ah, there you are, Tom,’ Dumbledore said, and with a neat flick of his wand, the chicken was a matchstick once more. ‘Very good work today.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

Fighting the desire to tidy his desk and seem busy, Tom stood straight and waited for Dumbledore to talk. Dumbledore flicked his wand again —he was brandishing it so blatantly that Tom wanted to ask what had happened to his other—and the matchsticks arranged themselves in a neat pile.

‘I wanted to apologise to you,’ Dumbledore said. ‘You didn’t deserve the dismissal you received from me in first-year, Tom.’

Tom bit his tongue at the mention of first-year. ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about, professor,’ he said.

‘Don’t you? I’m afraid I was too hard on you. I allowed my mistrust to

mar my judgement. We got off to a messy start in Wools' —Tom twitched at the word—'and from there on, I didn't do anything to make your time at Hogwarts more comfortable.'

Tom didn't say anything for a moment.

'Forgive me, sir, but I didn't need you to make my time at Hogwarts more comfortable. You're not the Head of Slytherin House.'

'Quite true. But nevertheless, Tom, a brilliant mind like yourself — I could have provided you with so much guidance. I saw your troubled state and did nothing. I'm ashamed.'

'I wasn't in a *troubled state*,' Tom said. 'Maybe all the time you spent watching me left you with the wrong impression.'

'Maybe,' Dumbledore agreed, 'and there's no need to dance around the topic any longer. I do believe I've misjudged you.'

The classroom was sun-soaked and cool air streamed through the open windows. The voices of students floated up from the grounds as they lounged outside, basking in the rare Scottish sunlight.

Tom fingered his wand. 'Misjudged me?' he repeated, 'how's that, professor?'

'I never gave you the opportunity to be anything more than the ideas I had placed upon you. Your influence made me wary, as did the intricate dynamic in Slytherin House. But I know more than anyone what encouragement and praise can do to a bright, growing mind — if I dare be so immodest. Once I was full of grand ideas too, ideas of shaping the world, of moulding it beneath my very hands. I failed you.'

Tom's shoulders straightened. The idea of being similar to Dumbledore in any way was so repellent that he clenched his jaw. Looking Dumbledore straight in the eye, he said, 'You didn't fail me. Forgive me, sir, but there's nothing you could have possibly provided me with that I couldn't achieve myself.'

He put his hands in his pockets. Dumbledore was frowning sadly at him, all earnest and stupid and knowing. Tom continued, 'and anyway, sir, it's a bit late for the sentiments now. A shame, of course — I'm sure it would have been *wonderful* to learn from you.'

He smiled — wide and mocking —but Dumbledore only shook his

head.

‘A bit late, indeed, Mr Riddle, and for that I offer my sincerest apologies. I believe you don’t need my help after all — unless, of course, you’re still inclined to take it.’

Tom stopped. Torn between the desire to tell Dumbledore exactly where he could take his *sincerest apologies*, and disbelief at the latter component of the sentence, he raised his eyebrows. ‘There is absolutely nothing you can offer me,’ he agreed. ‘Professor.’

Dumbledore’s face was doing something strange. His lips were twisted in what was a cheap imitation of regret and yet his eyes —

His eyes were positively gleaming.

‘You think I’ve changed,’ Tom breathed. ‘Oh, *dear*.’

Laughter spilled from his lips, echoing around the classroom. Dumbledore still stood there, smiling that passive smile, while Tom’s voice took on a manic tone.

‘I haven’t changed,’ he said, ‘but I appreciate this speech, nevertheless.’ He shifted on the spot, staring straight into Dumbledore’s eyes.

‘Does it make you feel guilty to imagine you had some part in the person I’ve become? Surely you could have changed me for the better — shaped my young mind before it was ruined forever. Isn’t that a bit … wistful, professor?’

Professor Dumbledore blinked. ‘Mr Riddle,’ he began, ‘I understand we’ve never been friendly —’

‘You’re my professor,’ Tom said, ‘nothing more. And if anything, you were right about me. It is all an act.’

He knew better than to say anything about fifth-year and the annoyingly close eye Dumbledore had kept on him ever since. He knew how careful he had to be; knew Harry had told Dumbledore exactly what Tom was.

‘Ambition isn’t a bad thing, Tom,’ Dumbledore said. ‘But it’s our choices who show us who we truly are.’

‘I completely agree,’ Tom said. ‘I’ve always given my choices careful

consideration. And I'm pretty certain I know *exactly* how I want my future to go.'

His hands were sweating in his pockets. The words came out stiff, awkward, too cold and clumsy. There was an entire classroom between them and Dumbledore had decided to stand directly in Tom's personal space.

He couldn't move away, no matter how much he wanted to. Distance meant unease, and unease meant defeat. Tom smiled and added, 'anyway, professor, I should probably head to lunch.'

'Of course, Tom,' Dumbledore said. 'I'm sure your friends will be wondering where you are. Is that how you refer to them?'

'Yes,' he said, without missing a beat. 'That's them.'

'Excellent. I'll admit I was worried for a while…'

Tom clenched his teeth.

'Anyway, professor, as enlightening as this has been, I must head on. Can't leave my friends waiting, can I?' He smiled, cold and false, and for the smallest second, he saw a flash of disgust in Dumbledore's eyes.

Satisfied, he made his way to the door. Dumbledore was still watching him, those pale, goading eyes boring into his head.

And Tom turned.

'I don't accept your apology either. In fact'—his smile became a little more genuine—'I've never really liked you, sir.'

Tom speared a piece of meat with his fork and blocked out the chatter at the table. He had never cared what Dumbledore thought of him, and yet his own words kept replaying in his mind. Slimy, false, so obvious even Dumbledore could see it. It had been a test and Tom had failed.

At the Head Table, Dumbledore sat talking to Professor Slughorn, but neither of them were looking Tom's way. Dumbledore's long auburn

beard was tucked underneath his robes, and he laughed at whatever Professor Slughorn said, though Tom knew it couldn't possibly be funny.

Chewing slowly, Tom looked around. Belinda was reading a letter underneath the table, smiling at random intervals. Beside her, Abraxas and Alphard were talking Quidditch strategies (Alphard kept glancing at the Gryffindor Table in case they were eavesdropping) and, directly in his line of sight, Lucretia talked with Harry. She was staring at him in a way that made Tom's teeth clench—coy and sweet, twisting her hair around her fingers while he remained oblivious.

Rosier was also staring at Harry.

Tom lifted his goblet and took a slow sip. There was apprehension in Rosier's eyes— and something else, something awkward and lingering. Tom knew they had argued around Christmas time and Harry had done something to make Rosier wary. Perhaps they had duelled.

'I'm sure we'll beat Gryffindor,' Lucretia said. 'You're an amazing seeker.' She was leaning into Harry's space, smiling warmly, with deep dimples in her cheeks.

'Did you tell your boyfriend the same thing?' Harry said.

Tom watched them from the corner of his eye. It was impossible not to listen when Harry spoke like that: warm, teasing, sly. Tom sunk his teeth into his cheek until he tasted blood.

'You mean Ignatius?' She blushed. 'He's not my *boyfriend.'*

'Does he know that?'

'We're not serious. It's not serious. Oh, stop laughing, Harry, and keep your voice down.'

Lucretia's cheeks were pink but she was grinning, because Harry's grin was contagious, and the way she was looking at him made Tom want to stab someone.

He put down his goblet and tuned out the sound.

He wanted Voldemort.

He had always wanted Voldemort. It would bring him the satisfaction he craved, the power he sought after. How couldn't it, ruling all,

having all?

It had to.

Three days after Harry had shown Tom his memories, Tom broke into his trunk again. It took half an hour to get through the anti-intruder charms this time and his hands blistered from his efforts. He waited until Harry went to Quidditch practice —knew he had to part with the wand sometime — and found it, buried beneath half a dozen t-shirts. Tom had taken it from the trunk and inspected it in the light.

It was burning hot to touch, and the rush it gave off was like an electric shock through his system. He knew better than to cast a spell.

Tom allowed himself a moment to imagine it. The Elder Wand as his, not Harry's. The power under his fingers, the assurance it would bring. He could feel something stirring if he thought about it too much: tantalising, beckoning, the sweet flood of obsession.

Tom put the wand back and went for a walk around the grounds. The memories Harry had shown him played on loop in his mind, a mockery of everything he longed for. The idea of satisfaction had been truly trodden when he remembered Voldemort's pitiful form, crouching in the forest, drinking unicorn blood.

He wondered how much he could change things. There would be no death, no resurrection. And yet even at the height of his power —the peak Tom burned for—Voldemort looked weak. Obsessive and dissatisfied. Everything Tom feared.

...they were my memories. I'm sure others would be different.

He thought of what it would be like to give it all up. It was like standing at the edge of a cliff looking onto an empty canvas of land, white and fathomless. Sinking into a void, into a thick sludge he could never escape. Being pulled down and down and —

He pushed it to the back of his mind.

Tom ditched potions for the first time in years and headed to the Chamber of Secrets. He took the time to run his hands along the smooth walls, admire the greenish gloom, and wander around the winding passageways. He'd miss the Chamber when he finished Hogwarts; miss it so much he felt momentarily breathless. It was a reminder of everything he was and could become. It was beautiful and hidden and entirely his.

He dragged his thoughts away from the place they were slipping to and instead imagined life without Harry. Tom could do whatever he wanted without him in the corner of his eye. Unless he sought Harry out, they wouldn't see each other. They wouldn't exist in the same space.

He was sure they'd meet again in the future. Harry would probably be an Auror — in those rich scarlet robes, stubble on his jaw, the Elder Wand dangling between his fingers. And Tom …

Tom would be everything he ever wanted. At the very pinnacle of his power, the height of his dreams, having explored the Wizarding World completely.

Maybe Harry would be *married.* Some bosomy witch who made him home-cooked meals and told him he was brave. Some sandy-haired wizard who played Quidditch and liked small children and never argued, never thought too hard on anything.

Something dull and suffocating and final.

Would he ever think of Tom? Turn the pages of the Daily Prophet and be struck cold by the blazing headlines, heart jumping into his throat?

Or would he seek him out — bound by that old guilt, eyes blazing, wand raised?

Tom wondered if he would hesitate. Falter.

He knew Harry would despise him. That they'd never have a chance, that it was done, over, as meaningless as a fleeting daydream.

Tom stared around the Chamber until his magic started to stir. A pillar split down the middle with an enormous crack. The choking ivy rustled. And under his feet the remains rose into the air. The empty

sockets of a rat skull gazed at him, pitted with moss, hollow and mocking.

Tom raised his wand and with a finality that couldn't be taken back, it shattered and exploded outwards, a thousand fragments of white bone.

The weather improved in March and for the Slytherin Quidditch Team, this meant a suspension from studying. The match against Gryffindor was in less than a week, and all around the school bets were being made, banners designed, and excitement was stirring.

While he no longer shared dreams with Harry, Tom awoke to the image of his own waxy face. He dreamed he fell from the Astronomy Tower, darkness swimming around him, reaching for a wand that didn't exist. That he lived in the Riddle House, the orphanage, wandless, nameless, unable to leave. Dreams where he stumbled upon the Death Eaters and found they didn't recognise him; where he realised he wasn't the heir of Slytherin, but a no-name halfblood.

His face flickering in the mirror. His hands shrivelling up. Slughorn shaking his head, his mouth down-turned. *He was a great student once. I guess I was wrong about him.*

Tom cast spells more violently than he ever had before and forced himself to talk to the Death Eaters; forced himself to pretend it was fulfilling. Teeth sinking into his cheek, squeezing his wand in his pocket. He could make himself care. He could *make* it enjoyable.

'Have you given any more thought to the ministry?' Professor Slughorn asked him one evening. They were in his office, having talked potions and politics for the last hour, and Tom had drunk half a bottle of elf-made whiskey until his thoughts no longer gnawed at him.

Fuzzy and warm, the question made him laugh.

'What of it?' he said. 'I don't want a desk job. I want to travel and learn new magic. Not be stuck doing boring paperwork, in a boring office, and pretending it means something.'

If Professor Slughorn noticed that Tom was half-drunk, he was much too intoxicated to find it anything but amusing.

'Ah, but Tom,' he said, his whole face flushed, 'don't you want to make a name for yourself?'

'I will make a name for myself,' Tom said. 'I don't need the ministry for that.'

'No, no, but it's a damn shame. You could go into any department you want, become the minister even. Or work in spell exploration if you're so keen on it. Look at Albus — the things he did before he was teaching here. And now, the duel with Grindelwald, his spot on the Wizengamot…'

Tom pulled a face at the mention of Dumbledore and Professor Slughorn laughed, a real booming sound.

'You're never going to coax me into the ministry,' Tom said confidently.

'No, perhaps not. I suppose you could travel for a few years, learn those things you're so desperate to discover, and then come back and take that Defence position you're so hung up on.'

'Maybe,' Tom said, surprised that Slughorn's thoughts were so similar to his own.

'Or maybe you find something abroad. Germany does the most wonderful research into Alchemy, and has the best library I've ever seen. The entire collection of Merlin's work is preserved.'

'I do want to visit Germany,' Tom agreed. It was the after —the coming back to England, the Death Eaters—that made him shift in his seat. Unlocking his potential had always been his main goal. Conquering death, having complete power, followed shortly after.

But there were other means of gaining power. More difficult means, more mundane ones. Means that involved smiling through meetings rather than his Death-Eaters inspiring fear.

Power was an itch he wanted to scratch but did it have to come through ruling? Tom didn't need to take over the world to prove that he was Voldemort. He didn't need *any* of them.

The room was spinning.

‘Have you ever felt like everything you wanted is a lie?’ Tom said, the words spilling from his mouth, unprovoked. ‘That it will turn out horribly, never bring you the satisfaction you imagined, you practically have *proof*’—even mutilated and deformed, Tom could recognise dissatisfaction on his own face—‘but you want it anyway?’

The lights were pulsing and somehow his glass was empty again.

‘Why on earth would you want it?’

‘Because it’s everything. It’s years of work, years of unquestioning desire. And it’s all meaningless anyway, it was all just a search for some sort of fulfilment—’

The candles were shimmering, too bright, too dazzling.

‘And what *is* that anyway, if not chasing a new desire, a miserable shred of hope —’

Tom shut up at once. The concern on Professor Slughorn’s face was more sobering than any potion, and his skin prickled, the fuzzy feeling inside starting to grow cold.

He could barely remember what he had said. But that expression — that awful, mystified face—made him want to raise his wand and erase the memory for both of them.

Professor Slughorn sighed.

‘You’re eighteen, Tom. How could you possibly waste your life? What’re five years, a decade, fifty years even? It’s nothing to a wizard. And what’s saying you can’t change your mind, do something new?’

Tom didn’t have fifty years. He had *forever*.

But the thought was paralysing. He shifted his eyes towards the window, trying to escape the heat of the room. Thick olive curtains rustled against the night air. The room was lit by oil lamps, orange and golden, and his head thumped thickly.

The onslaught of thoughts was relentless. Tom shut out the doubt in his mind — gnawing at him, fingers ripping through gauze —and poured the rest of the whiskey into his glass. He downed it, throat burning, and exaggerated a yawn.

‘I should probably head back,’ he said, while Professor Slughorn

watched him with foggy eyes. ‘We forgot about curfew.’

‘Oh, dear me,’ Slughorn said, lifting a pocket watch to his eyes. ‘Look at the time! And Tom — remember, my offer always stands. You need any money, maybe a good word with the right people’—he was already refilling his glass— ‘I’m here.’

‘I know, professor,’ Tom said. He smiled at him. ‘Thank you.’

When he moved into the hallway, the flood of moonlight was blinding. The framed portraits were aglow and the moon was fat and yellow and low in the sky. Tom stumbled into a suit of armour and silenced it with his wand before it started to yell. He tore his eyes away from the glimmering night sky, his head swimmy.

Halfway down the corridor, he was struck with the idea to find Harry. It was time Harry knew that he had caused this mess. Time that he knew how he had stripped Tom’s life of everything meaningful, leaving it dull and hollow and uninspiring.

Tom leaned against a wall and thought. Harry stayed late in the library on Thursdays and parted with Weasley and Granger at the staircase. If Tom made his way down the stairs now, he could catch him on his way to the dungeons.

He hurried down the stairs, almost tripping several times, and reached the ground floor. Something —a blurry thought at the fringes of his mind—told him this was an awful idea. He wasn’t meant to talk to Harry anymore: it was some sappy, sentimental reason — they needed *distance.*

However, when Harry descended the stairs, just as Tom had guessed he would, Tom’s train of thought died.

‘Tom?’ Harry said. ‘You scared the life out of me.’

He came down the stairs slowly. In the dark, his expression was impossible to read.

‘I wanted to talk to you,’ Tom said, stumbling forward. ‘About Voldemort. *I’m* Voldemort. I’m always going to be Voldemort. I …’ he blinked in the shadows. ‘I *am*.’

A flicker of something crossed Harry’s face at the words: Tom couldn’t make it out in the dimness and he leaned forward, squinting.

‘Of course you are,’ Harry said. ‘I know that.’ He frowned. ‘Are you okay?’

‘I’m great. Aren’t you? Did you see how big the moon is? It’s so bright.’

Harry tilted his head. ‘Are you drunk*?’*

‘No. Are *you* drunk?’

Harry laughed, and the sound made Tom’s anger fizzle out. His head reeled. He wasn’t aware that he was reaching out to touch Harry’s tie before he was being batted away.

‘We should probably head back to the common room,’ Harry said. ‘Unless you want everyone to see the Head Boy completely pissed.’

Tom wrinkled his nose. ‘I don’t want to go back to the common room. The Slytherins will be there. And I can’t —’

It was so much work to have to deal with them all the time. Especially when his head was thumping; when he wanted nothing more than to drag Harry into a dark broom cupboard and touch every part of his skin.

‘They’re probably in bed.’ Harry’s lips twitched. ‘And anyway, you’ll be fine. You’re very good at pretending to be sober.’

‘I am, aren’t I? Especially when they’re a bunch of idiots —’

Harry snorted. ‘Don’t tell Rosier that. I think he’d cry.’

‘Rosier?’

Tom frowned. Harry’s face was overwhelming at this angle.

‘I think he wants to shag you.’

Harry laughed. His teeth glinted white in the dark. ‘You think everyone wants to shag me.’

‘They *do.’*

‘It’s really only you.’

Tom blinked at him. ‘I do want to shag you,’ he agreed, his lips curving. ‘We could go do that right now if you want.’

Harry's eyes went wide. 'I was joking,' he said, and Tom cursed the darkness because he knew Harry's cheeks had flushed. 'And please. You can barely stand up.'

'We're not going to be standing.'

'Oh seriously, Tom. Why are you drunk anyway?'

'I'm …'

He wasn't sure why it hurt so much to look at Harry. Everything had softened around him. The lights overhead were fuzzy and the slant of the stairs was a long stretch of darkness.

Tom blinked to clear the fog.

'Slughorn,' he said. 'He's more bearable when you also drink.'

'That's lies and you know it. You two have such a weird relationship.'

'Better than you and Dumbledore. You know he spoke to me the other day? Apparently, he wants to apologise for thinking so badly of me.' He snorted. 'Like he's not building a case to send me to Azkaban the minute I leave.'

'He wouldn't,' Harry said. 'Dumbledore doesn't care what you do, really, as long as you're not harming people.'

'Dumbledore doesn't,' Tom said, 'or you don't?'

They were standing too close. Before he knew what he was doing, Tom reached out and touched Harry's cheek. It was warm beneath his fingers, and Harry shifted but didn't pull away.

'Tom,' he began quietly. 'We can't.'

'We can,' Tom said. 'It doesn't have to mean anything.'

He watched Harry swallow.

'We can pretend it never even happened. *And*'—his voice dropped meaningfully— 'I'll do whatever you want.'

'Whatever I want?' Harry repeated. The curve of his lips was dazzling. 'You're sure about that?'

'Positive,' Tom said, and they stared at each other unblinkingly.

Harry laughed. He was still standing very close and his breath was warm near Tom's cheek, making Tom's head spin.

'You shouldn't make promises you can't keep, Tom. Especially when you're drunk.'

He grinned. 'Who says I can't keep them?'

'Have you forgotten that we're not dating?'

'Dating.' Tom wrinkled his nose. 'Did we ever call it that? And anyway, I'm talking about shagging in a broom cupboard for old time's sake, not…'

The look Harry gave him was so painful that Tom blinked. Harry's face was too blinding and the corridor was starting to spin. Tom closed his eyes and stumbled; felt hands on his shoulder, someone guiding him down the hall.

'We're not going to a broom cupboard, are we?' he said dryly, opening his eyes to the swimming corridor.

Harry's lips flickered. 'I'm afraid just the common room.'

Tom staggered. 'You…' he began, leaning on Harry, even though he didn't need to. The shoulder of his robe was soft and worn and pleasant. 'You smell really nice.'

Harry's hair was tickling Tom's cheek and he didn't push Tom away and force him to prove that he could, indeed, walk unaided.

'It must be the shampoo.'

'No, it's —'he almost pressed his mouth to Harry's cheek— 'it's just you. You're…'

He fumbled with the words, stumbling carelessly down the darkened staircase.

'We should go outside. It's so warm. Or'—he brightened— 'we should go and see *Dumbledore.* I want to ask him what he wants.'

'We're not going to see Dumbledore,' Harry said. 'You can fight with him tomorrow in class if you want.'

'In class? You really are a Gryffindor.'

‘I’m not —’ For a second, Harry almost sounded defensive. Then he laughed. ‘I can’t believe you’re so drunk.’

‘You’re drunk,’ Tom retorted.

They reached the dungeons. Tom was unable to contain the babble that came from his mouth. His head was fuzzy and light; thoughts were distant, vibrant things, all of which he used to fill the silence with.

‘…and then Professor Slughorn decided I should talk to Dirk Belby, even though I was in *second year —’*

He blinked. They were outside the common room and Harry carefully lifted Tom’s arm off his shoulder.

Tom patted down his hair and straightened up. ‘Do I really look pissed?’ he asked, adjusting his tie as discreetly as he could.

Harry’s mouth twitched. ‘Just don’t talk to anyone and you’ll be fine.’

But when the entrance opened, the common room was dark and silent. The fires were out and the torches burned low, casting green shadows across the furniture.

‘That’s a pity,’ Harry said. ‘I wanted to watch you embarrass yourself.’

‘That would never happen,’ Tom lied. He staggered into the nearest armchair, head thumping. He hadn’t realised how dizzy he was, how dreamlike the room seemed, until he closed his eyes.

He had forever.

Forever.

He wouldn’t die. He couldn’t. Unless…

‘What if I made more horcruxes?’ he said. ‘Would you try to destroy them?’

Harry was standing several feet away. ‘Of course not,’ he said, blinking at the question. ‘I don’t like them but they’re yours. It’s the killing people aspect I hate the most. And the way it unbalances your magic, messes up your face …’

‘We can’t have that,’ Tom said dryly. ‘Heaven forbid, I look *ugly.’*

He twisted his ring. ‘I don’t want more, anyway. Maybe one. Because I don’t have you anymore, and even though you weren’t a real horcrux —’

He hesitated. This was precisely the sort of thing that would start another argument.

‘I get it,’ Harry said. ‘But for the record, I’d never destroy the two you have now. Unless you did something really bad to me. Like kill someone I love, or —’ he rubbed the back of his neck. ‘Nevermind. I’m going to bed.’

Tom stared at him for a long moment. Harry looked awkward, shifting on the spot and playing with the hem of his robes. Lovely.

‘Yeah, me too,’ Tom said slowly. The room jumped as he rose.

‘Maybe drink some water,’ Harry said. ‘Or a sobriety potion. You could raid Avery’s trunk for one.’

Tom’s lips quirked at the suggestion. It was so cruel that his skin tingled and heat twisted in his gut.

‘It’s fine,’ he said, forcing his mind not to wander. ‘I probably won’t dream of Voldemort this way. It’s better.’

He wasn’t aware of what he had said until he saw Harry’s face. Those eyes were closer than they had been before, great and green and incredulous.

‘It’s nothing,’ Tom said, blinking away the image. He put his hands in his pockets. ‘Actually, it’s all your fault. You showed me those memories. You twisted everything I believe in. All my ideas, my plans. Everything.’

Harry didn’t answer him for a minute. He was watching Tom carefully, as if concerned. The thought made Tom want to hex him. His thoughts were slipping; Harry was so close, and tantalising, like a warm, unfiltered light.

‘Bollocks,’ Harry said. ‘I didn’t cause you to think anything. You’re the one who can’t deal with the fact you’re questioning how you’re going to take over the world.’

‘I’m not questioning that,’ Tom said. ‘Not even for a second.’

‘I don’t see what any of that has to do with me.’

Tom looked at him with bleary eyes. He almost said it then, almost couldn’t help himself. But even drunk, even with the room spinning so much he felt nauseous, Tom managed to push it down.

‘Can I see your scar?’ he said instead.

Harry stilled. ‘Sure, it’s …’

He was halfway through lifting his fringe when Tom pulled him forward. He didn’t really want to see the scar. He wanted to get his fingers in Harry’s stupid, tousled head and lean against him until the room stopped spinning.

But Harry didn’t comply with this inane request. He pushed Tom back gently, and when Tom looked down and saw he was clutching Harry’s wrists, he let go like he had been burned.

‘Harry,’ he breathed, raking his face for any signs of revulsion.

‘It’s alright,’ Harry said. ‘I just …’

He hesitated. When he bit his bottom lip, Tom had to close his eyes. His head was thick and his thoughts were loose and drifting.

‘You look good when you’re conflicted,’ Tom said. ‘Like you hate yourself for it, but you want it so bad, and I just — I want…’

He forced himself to stop. Harry’s eyes were very wide and a flush was building in his cheeks. He was looking at Tom like he had never seen him before, all open-mouthed and disbelieving.

‘I do too,’ he said. ‘But we can’t. *And’*—he said this very firmly—'you are so drunk.’

Tom didn’t disagree with him. His head was starting to clear rapidly, but it was easier to pretend he was completely intoxicated — otherwise he wouldn’t be able to look Harry in the eye.

They made their way up the darkened staircase. Outside the dorm, Harry put a finger to his lips and hesitated.

‘Do you want a dreamless sleep potion?’ he said. ‘I have a couple lying around somewhere.’

Tom stared at him: the sincerity in his eyes, the way his hair curled at

the front, the stupid, tender expression on his face. He felt like he had been punched.

'No,' he said, a vestige of his pride remaining despite his inability to walk straight. 'See you in the morning.'

Harry opened the door quietly and they stepped inside. The lights were off and the room was entirely black. Tom stumbled in the dark to his four-poster, unable to bear being near Harry any longer. He'd only say something ridiculous, or sappy, or feel that sting of rejection once again.

'Night, Tom,' Harry said softly. He was yanking off his tie —Tom could hear him and it was *unfair* — and unbuttoning his robes.

Tom didn't answer.

He pulled the curtains of his four-poster and closed his eyes. His head pulsed. He was weightless, dizzy, and Harry's face — amused, soft, the tender radiance of his smile —seemed to play on repeat. Tom shifted on his side and thought of Voldemort and everything he wanted; Voldemort, and the stale finality of it, like a contract he couldn't get out of. He thought of *forever,* until the word ceased to have meaning.

And the dreams came as they always did, vivid and frantic, distorted and mocking.

Tom had a headache that lasted the entire day. Harry asked him how he was feeling at lunch —Tom was staring stonily at his cup of tea — and Tom replied that he was just wonderful. The memories from the night before were hazy, but looking at Harry brought one into unnatural vividness: Tom, touching Harry's cheek and telling him that he'd do *whatever he wanted;* the gleam of amusement in Harry's eye, the twitch of his lips.

Tom winced.

The day passed slowly. Professor Slughorn watched Tom guiltily from the Head Table but Tom knew he could amend that in due time. He didn't take a hangover potion as he should have but instead, revelled in the discomfort and the way it dulled his senses.

In the evening, unable to sit in the common room any longer, he took Nina Shafiq's shift —ever the generous Head Boy —and patrolled the school. His wand spilling light onto the stone floor, Tom took particular enjoyment in bursting into broom cupboards and docking house points from half-dressed, terrified students.

It was on the seventh-floor —coming out from behind the tapestry of the kneazles —that Tom stilled. The voice from behind the classroom door was one he recognised, and moving quietly, he pressed his ear to the wood.

'...the Law Enforcement Squad,' Ron Weasley said. 'It seems cool. Or have a business the way Fred and George did —maybe start up something similar to Weasley's Wizard Wheezes and pass it down to them, yeah?'

Another voice chimed in—one Tom would always recognise.

'You'd be their hero,' Harry said. 'I'm sure my dad would love it too.'

'He would, wouldn't he? What about you?'

Tom leaned closer to the door, closing his eyes and concentrating.

'I want to explore my magic a bit first,' Harry said. 'There's never been a Master of Death before, so I want to figure that out. Maybe I'll go into wandlore or something. Become an Unspeakable. But right now —'

Tom imagined the expression on his face. The way he would stand, leaning against one of the desks, giving Weasley his full attention.

'—I'll figure something out. Travel. Become a curse-breaker.'

The sound of laughter from behind the door.

'No, seriously,' Harry continued, 'do you know how long I've been the *Boy-Who-Lived*? I didn't even think I'd survive until my NEWTs and now I don't have that anymore. It's... weird. I want to actually do things.'

There was a pause and Tom shifted, trying to see through the small crack.

'Well, that's all very nice,' Granger said, 'but on the more practical side, have you considered teaching Defence? You were great at it,

Harry. And you loved the DA.'

'I did love the DA,' he said. 'But I wouldn't do that to Tom.'

Tom froze. There was a beat of silence and a nervous laugh. The sound of someone moving.

'*What?'*

'Well, it would be a pretty shitty thing to do. He really wants the Defence position.'

'Riddle teaching Defence would be the worst thing to ever happen to Hogwarts,' Granger said, 'and anyway, Dumbledore will become Headmaster and never give it to him.'

'That's why it's … shitty.'

'You need to stop caring about what he wants. He's not your responsibility, or even a part of your life. If you do things based on making Riddle happy, you'll never get over him.'

Harry didn't say anything. There was only a door between them, a thin oak barrier, and Tom held his breath, gripping the wood beneath his hand.

'I'm not going to just *stop caring* about him,' Harry said. 'Would you never think of Ron again if you broke up?'

'That's different! Please don't compare —'

'Fine! But I don't want to teach Defence or talk about him anymore. It really doesn't help.'

'I'm sorry,' Granger said. 'I didn't mean to bring it up. Let's…'

Tom strained his ears.

'...head back. Nina knows I'm out of bed, but still. It's getting late.'

A chair screeched and someone stood. Before they had a chance to discover him, Tom backed down the corridor and out of sight. He slipped into the nearest dark alcove, opposite the Gryffindor Common Room, and squeezed his wand until his hands stopped trembling.

Seeing Harry —hearing Harry, through an inch of wood — was maddening. Tom dragged his fingers through his hair, staring into the

darkness.

Weasley and Granger were making their way down the corridor. Granger's thick hair glinted in the torchlight; Weasley was nodding vigorously and almost tripping over his own feet.

Tom didn't listen to what they were saying. His tie was too tight and he yanked it loose. When they disappeared into their common room, he left the alcove and headed down an empty hallway, away from the dungeons.

Moonlight glittered on the stone tiles and the suits of armour stood like silent observers, watching him hurry. Tom wet his lips. His mind was racing. It was victory in a strange sort of way; defeat in another.

But it had never been about giving it all up.

Harry's future was a blurry path that could stretch in any direction. And the warm cadence of his voice, the sentiments he echoed...

They were potential.

Tom reached the end of the hallway and stared onto the grounds. The surface of the Lake was black and fathomless, despite the moon above. His hands were still trembling.

He was Voldemort and he always would be; he was Voldemort and Harry *knew*. Harry didn't care about the name. Nor the way Tom craved power. It was only the finer details, the invisible line that crossed from unpleasant to wrong.

Tom's skin tingled. He backed away from the window, down the marble staircase, his feet guiding him as the castle faded away. All that was left was the feverish speed of his mind.

What was Voldemort anyway, but a name? What was he giving up apart from the Death Eaters, one opportunity for leadership, one pathway in the dozen that spanned before him?

He had other dreams he could fulfil first. Other aspirations. He had *forever*.

He rubbed his hands against his robes. It wasn't giving up, but putting it on hold. It wasn't the end but another way.

Harry would compromise.

He *would.*

Tom slowed down at the dungeons. It rushed through him, terrifying in its intensity. But beneath the way his heart thundered, was something hot and possessive. It spread through his mind, his skin, his veins; an infection, alighting his senses.

He never should have given Harry up. It was unfathomable. Unthinkable. It was Harry.

And it wasn't a choice but an admission.

Acceptance

Three days before the quidditch match against Gryffindor, Harry and Abraxas sat in the stands. Harry was playing absent-mindedly with the golden snitch, tossing it high into the air and catching it with ease. Beside him, pink-cheeked and sweaty from practice, Abraxas drank water from a bottle and scrubbed the handle of his broomstick.

It was sunny for March and their hair was plastered to their foreheads. Rivulets of water clung to Abraxas' skin and his eyes were half-closed against the sun. The feeling after playing Quidditch was one Harry would never tire of: his legs ached, his heart pounded and his mind was finally clear. They sat in silence for a while, watching the trees sway in the distance, and then, still leaning against the bench with his eyes shut, Abraxas said, 'I'm going to work in the ministry.'

Harry put down the snitch and squinted at him. Abraxas' tone was light and matter-of-fact and his posture didn't reveal any tension.

'Why are you going to do that?' Harry stuffed the snitch into his pocket. 'You don't want to work there, you said it yourself.'

'I did say it,' Abraxas agreed, 'but it's not the worst thing in the world. It's a job —a good one—and it would make my parents happy. It wouldn't make me *un*happy, either. I could still do art on the side. If I hate it so much, I can always quit.'

The Quidditch Pitch was green and dazzling. Harry thought for a moment, wiping his hair from his face.

'Is that honestly what you want?'

'Yes,' Abraxas said. His eyes opened. He was already starting to sunburn. 'And my father and I are getting on much better now. He owled me the other day, and it was like ten inches of parchment. Ten.'

Something in Harry's chest squeezed.

'He should love you anyway, not just when you go along with what he wants.'

'He does,' Abraxas said, more defensively than Harry had ever heard him speak of his father. 'He's my *father*, Harry. I don't want to be a disappointment. And I'm an only child, I'd be practically abandoning

the Malfoy name.'

'Just because you're an only child doesn't mean you're obligated to do what your dad wants you to.'

'I know, but I *want to.* I have to.'

Harry should have known how easily Abraxas would give in to the slightest bit of affection; how desperately he craved approval. It wasn't something Harry could change.

'You'd never be a disappointment,' he said. 'But it's your life. If you actually want that ministry position, then go for it.'

They stared out at the pitch and Abraxas began scrubbing his broomstick again. The handle gleamed mahogany and gold in the sunlight and his shoulders loosened as he exhaled.

Harry curled his fingers around the snitch in his pocket, feeling the tiny wings fight against him.

'Thanks, Harry,' Abraxas said.

It had been two days since Harry had stumbled upon Tom and Tom was avoiding him in a way that was a lot more purposeful than before. The first potions class they had, Harry made an offhand joke about getting drunk but Tom only stiffened, brushing it aside. Harry felt Tom look at him several times, and when he glanced back, he found Tom looking glazed and distracted, eyebrows furrowed in thought.

In Slytherin House, the hush that had surrounded Harry —half-wary, half-mistrustful—was overridden by excitement for the upcoming match. The team were training harder than ever and Harry's entire body ached from his efforts. The buzz from when he had been with Tom had fizzled out, and for once —tentatively—Harry felt *normal.*

Rosier no longer treated him cautiously. After months of not spending time with Tom, Harry was no longer regarded with jealousy; these days, Rosier barely looked his way and when he did, it was with something curious, rather than contempt. Harry asked Belinda one

day, as they studied Charms in the common room, what exactly had changed.

She laughed at him. ‘You really freaked him out, Harry, but in a way, you’re not a threat anymore. He’s always been desperate for Tom’s attention, and now I’m not sure he wants it. He’s never going to be you — so why even try?’

That sounded preposterous to Harry but he thought maybe she was right about the fear thing.

‘Oh, and he’s sneaking off with the Ravenclaw keeper now. I suppose *that’s* a good distraction.’

Belinda was lighter these days, downright cheerful. She joked about her parents, wrote long letters to her sister that she posted every evening, and even began doing extra potions with Professor Slughorn. ‘Well, someone has to take over my parents’ store,’ she told Harry and Abraxas. ‘It may as well be me.’

Harry didn’t tell Ron and Hermione about his encounter with Tom. The way Tom had stared at him, all glassy-eyed and wondering. The things he had said. But Tom had been drunk, incoherent, barely able to keep his eyes open. Harry didn’t allow himself to think about it for too long.

Imagining Voldemort was almost soothing. Harry would replay the images of the Death Eaters, the devastation, and assure himself that he had made the right choice. It was the sticky area, where things weren't quite *bad*, that made his insides twist up. The time Tom had worked in Borgin and Burkes; all those years he spent travelling, before coming back to Britain. And during those moments — those long nights where he couldn’t escape the thoughts— Harry’s mind spun with what-ifs.

Hermione and Ron looked better than he had seen them all year. Harry had feared that the talk of careers and finishing Hogwarts would make things worse for them, but if anything, it did the opposite. Hermione told Harry one day, her voice low, that Ron actually sounded *excited* when he talked about finding a flat, and that she was really looking forward to discussing magical creature rights' with Dumbledore.

'It's still shit,' Ron said, 'but I think being out of Hogwarts might be a good thing. They're everywhere I look here — Fred, George, Ginny. Even Percy. And being away from it all … it will be something different at least, yeah?’

Though he didn't say it, Harry worried about Ron and spent as much time with him as possible. The memories of the past would never fade, he knew, and all he could do was try not to let them become consuming.

They were studying more than ever, and Hermione had dived into several research projects with ardour. She met several times with Dumbledore, not to talk about their past and time-travel, but her plans after Hogwarts. Harry's chest felt warm every time he saw her eagerly poring over scrolls, bottom lip between her teeth.

It was after a meeting with Professor Slughorn (thinly-veiled questions about Tom, a handful of glossy brochures, earl grey tea in china cups), that Harry sat in the Room of Requirement with his two friends. His core ached from quidditch practice; flying his new broomstick was even more taxing than the Firebolt.

'Do you think,' Ron began, his feet propped on the sofa, his head back, 'if they still existed —in another time-line or something—they'd be able to get over us disappearing?'

Harry straightened up and looked at him. Setting her parchment down on her knees, Hermione leaned forward.

'Your family, you mean?'

'Yeah. I know it's a stupid thought but just say they did exist, that this is like some alternate time-line —do you think it would tear mum apart?'

Harry shifted uncomfortably. He fought with the desire to look away from Ron's eyes, knowing he owed his friend this small truth.

'Mrs Weasley knows the cost of war,' he said. 'She knew we were going off on a mission to kill Voldemort. I think —if that ever was possible—she'd find a way to move on.'

'Well, what about Voldemort? The minute you disappeared, everyone would give up. No one knows about the horcruxes and we never did find the last one.'

Hermione hesitated, her face torn.

Harry met Ron's eyes steadily and said, 'people wouldn't just give up. The Order wouldn't give up. And even if they couldn't kill him, there are other ways. A Dementor's Kiss. Imprisonment.'

Ron looked at him for a second and nodded. 'I suppose you're right. I don't even know why I'm thinking about this. It's stupid.'

'It's not stupid,' Hermione said. 'I've thought about it too. I'm grateful I obliviated my parents now. It may seem crazy because I *know* they don't exist, but it's sort of comforting.'

'I don't dream about them as much,' Ron said, 'but I sort of'—he hesitated—'I sort of wish I did. I'm scared I'll forget what they look like or something. The way mum sounds. I dunno.' He rubbed the back of his neck, which had turned red.

Harry chewed his bottom lip between his teeth. 'Use Dumbledore's pensieve,' he said. 'I'm sure he'll let you put a couple of memories in it. They still stay in your mind, but they're vague. And that way you can preserve them.'

Ron blinked. 'I suppose... yeah. *Yeah.* It couldn't hurt to ask him, could it?'

'Or we could try to get a pensieve of our own in the future,' Hermione said, 'but they're really rare.'

'But still,' Harry insisted. 'Rare doesn't mean impossible. And legilimency also helps to recover faded memories, if the worst comes to the worst.'

He thought of Tom, and how fresh everything was — how raw and lurid and frayed — after he had allowed him into his mind.

'I don't fancy legilimency after that little stint with Riddle,' Ron said. 'I couldn't even feel him in my mind. At *all.* How creepy is that?'

'You're not used to it,' Harry said. 'And he uses a subtle approach. When Snape read my mind,'—he grimaced— 'let's just say it was pretty clear something was happening.'

'Speaking of Riddle,' Hermione said, 'I still can't believe he hasn't tried to steal the Elder Wand.'

Harry shifted in his seat. They were both watching him hesitantly. He hadn't told them about the many opportunities Tom had to do exactly that, and now he paused.

'He said he wouldn't,' Harry said. 'And honestly … I don't think it would work for him. I think because I'm the Master of Death, it's

always going to be mine. It feels like a part of me —even more than the holly wand does.'

'Still,' Ron said, 'I'm surprised he didn't do it out of spite. It's not every day someone dumps Tom Riddle, is it?'

'It's not like that,' Harry said. 'It was mutual.'

A snort.

'*Mutual.'*

'Well, we disagreed and decided to end things. *I* didn't want it to happen just as much as he didn't.'

Hermione frowned. 'As much as I don't approve of him, I'm sorry. I know you really liked him.'

Harry shrugged. It was more than that with Tom, something he didn't want to talk about. He forced himself not to dwell on it too much, because dissecting those thoughts only led him back to the same hollow, yearning place he couldn't escape.

'Hey, will you quiz me on Herbology?' Harry asked. 'We have a test right before the match.'

Harry stayed behind in Transfiguration, slowly packing his bag, until the room emptied. He was unable to help himself: ever since it had happened, ever since finding Tom beside the staircase, glassy-eyed and grinning, it had been playing through his mind.

At the front of the room, Dumbledore was straightening a stack of essays. The one at the top, written in small, smudged ink, shone with a glossy letter 'A.'

'Harry,' he said, coming forward and arranging the stack with a sweep of his wand. 'What can I do for you?'

They talked casually for a few moments; Dumbledore wished him luck in the upcoming quidditch match, though joked that it would be a

Gryffindor victory for sure. When he was unable to hold it in any longer, Harry said, as lightly as he could manage, ‘did you talk to Tom Riddle the other day?’

‘Mr Riddle?’

Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose.

‘We conversed, yes, but he wasn’t very pleased about it. Forgive me, Harry, but I didn’t think the two of you were friendly anymore, if I dare be so forward.’

‘No, we’re not,’ Harry said, wincing at the word *forward.* He wondered if the entire school knew they had been shagging. ‘But we’re still in the same house. Word gets around fast in Slytherin, and I couldn't help wondering …’

‘What I told him?’

Dumbledore’s lips twitched.

‘Sorry, sir. I just’—Harry chewed his lip— ‘I was under the impression that you hate him.’

‘I certainly harbour no strong aversion to Mr Riddle, though I admit we were never on the best of terms.’

‘Exactly, professor. And how could you be? He caused the death of a *student* and got Hagrid expelled. You’re right to dislike him. He hasn’t changed.’

‘That may be so,’ Dumbledore said, ‘but I find it curious how one can be so sure of what warrants change. Is a more subtle approach to his plans a change, if the intentions remain the same? Or does it come down to choice, however begrudging it may be?’

‘I don’t see why you’d apologise to him,’ Harry said. ‘He’ll never accept it. And nothing you could have done —nothing anyone could have done —would have made him a different person.’

He swallowed as he said it, putting his hands into his pockets and looking away from those piercing eyes.

‘Perhaps so,’ Dumbledore said, ‘but it was very amusing to watch him become indignant. Mr Riddle loathes the idea of change almost as much as you do.’

Harry paused.

‘I don’t loathe the idea of change.’

He loathed the idea of Tom moulding his personality, of forcing it into something unnatural, stripping away parts of himself as easily as a snake shedding its skin.

Dumbledore was watching Harry curiously, a hand resting on the wooden desk. ‘I know Mr Riddle will always be cold-hearted and selfish. A killer, if you will. Is that what you wish to hear?’

‘Yes, actually,’ Harry said, ‘because he always will be. And it doesn’t matter how you look at it.’

He hesitated. His mind felt muddled, and he couldn’t make sense of anything apart from a strong, burning desire for Dumbledore to understand that Tom would always be the person he hated; that Harry didn’t despise Tom’s flaws half as much as he should have, but instead let them settle somewhere inside him. Because in a way —in a way he would never have been able to acknowledge before —Harry didn't care about the slippery things Tom did, so long as they weren't outright wrong.

‘Sorry, sir,’ he said, ‘I suppose that doesn’t really make much sense. But you can’t condone the things he’s done. You can’t forgive him, especially not for…’

My sake.

‘Ah, Harry, who said anything about forgiveness? While I may have had no role in shaping Tom into the person he is, I made no attempt to change it either. And for that —for not trying —I am regretful.’

‘He would be too proud to let you help him, anyway. Unless you gave him something he couldn’t refuse. Maybe Fawkes, or some old trinket of Slytherin's.’

‘I’m afraid Fawkes and Tom loathe each other,’ Dumbledore said, ‘but I do see your point.’

They stood there for a moment, and Harry smiled at the thought. ‘I imagine they would,’ he said. ‘Did he get really freaked out when you apologised to him?’

‘I suppose *freaked out* would be the correct term, yes. I was most

affronted when he stormed out of the classroom.'

Harry laughed. 'I'm sure he thought it was a much more dramatic exit.'

'Indeed. And Harry, I didn't mean to meddle in your business with Tom, however it may have seemed.'

'It's fine, professor. I was just wondering what you were talking about. You got him really rattled.'

'Well, if that's the case then he masks it most cleverly. Though I admit, he seems a bit distracted these days.'

'Yeah, well'—Harry rubbed the back of his neck—'that's probably my fault.'

'Nonsense, my boy. I wish I had half the courage you did when I was younger. I never stood up to Gellert until it was too late for things to end in anything but disaster.'

'You did what was right in the end, professor.'

He swallowed. He wasn't Dumbledore and Tom wasn't Gellert. And could Harry really judge Tom for crimes he may commit; crimes Harry was scared would replay before his very eyes?

He couldn't get hung up on the past anymore. It wasn't his responsibility to watch over Tom, obsessing over the fact that he may repeat the things Voldemort did. He couldn't spend his life fearing it, not knowing what the future held. Not when everything had already changed so much.

'Well anyway, professor, I must get to lunch. Thank you.'

'The pleasure was all mine, Harry. And I must say, it's great to see your ritual was successful.'

Harry touched his scar as he moved towards the door. The hallway was empty, and Dumbledore was standing behind his desk, his face young and unlined, his eyes very bright.

Harry smiled.

'I'm glad too.'

The Final Quidditch Match

The morning of the final quidditch match, Harry woke earlier than the rest of his teammates. The sun had not yet risen but he was unable to sleep, too full of nervous, fizzing energy. Breakfast wasn't served in the hall until seven so he went to the kitchens, taking a shortcut through the dungeons across the winding halls. While drinking a mug of tea, he experimented idly with the Elder Wand, and when he finally came back to the dungeons, the others were awake.

'Morning,' Harry said to Abraxas, who was sitting in the common room, ashen-faced and vacant. 'Do you know where Alphard is?'

'He's arguing with the Gryffindor captain,' Abraxas said. 'Apparently, they both booked the pitch for seven. Now we get twenty minutes to warm up and so do they.'

He was dressed in his quidditch gear and staring into the weak embers of the fire.

'We'll be alright,' Harry told him. 'We can go over strategies instead.'

But when they went to the Hall for breakfast —ablaze in red and gold with hoots of laughter coming from the Gryffindor table— Abraxas picked at his breakfast and stared distantly at the roaring lion banner across the hall.

The rest of the team weren't faring any better. Thomas and Cygnus, the two Beaters, were casting loathing looks at the Gryffindors, and Alphard was arguing with two of the Chasers, all three of them tense.

'How are you so calm?' Abraxas asked Harry.

Harry shrugged. In truth, he was too queasy to eat more than a single slice of toast. His stomach was in his knots and every time he looked at that wash of red and gold it felt like being plummeted on the head with a bludger. Never had he wanted to win a match as badly as he did this one — and never did it feel like everything was so stacked against him.

'There's nothing we can do now,' he said. 'We've trained every day for the past month. We're more prepared than we'll ever be.'

This advice did nothing for Abraxas, so instead Harry tried to distract

him. He spoke of the first thing that popped into his head: his first Quidditch match, where he had almost swallowed the snitch. He had to fabricate a lot of the details, which only made it sound more absurd. Halfway through this tale, Tom turned in his seat and it was enough for Harry to falter. The glance made his stomach churn more than the nerves did, and he was grateful when Dumbledore stood to read out the morning announcements.

When he wished the Gryffindor team good luck, they roared with approval, raising their scarlet banner high. The Slytherins beside Harry tensed, Thomas Nott sitting upright in his seat, and Alphard shot them looks, warning them to 'play cleanly.'

When they left the hall and made their way down the hill, the sky was clear and the sun was rising above the Lake. Alphard glowered at this: sunshine meant a lot of squinting, particularly for Harry, and made the snitch almost impossible to see.

Harry told him he didn't mind.

They flew laps around the pitch and practised tossing the quaffle into the dazzling light. By the time they finished, the stands were starting to fill with students and the Gryffindors had arrived, brooms slung over their shoulders, scarlet robes gleaming in the sun.

Harry's teammates were pacing restlessly. It was the last match of the year, the big one; the last match he would ever play at Hogwarts. Harry stared at the Gryffindors, chatting and laughing and peering towards the stands, and imagined himself among them. It felt strange to see them there and know he wasn't one. But in another way — a way that had grown on him since September— it felt right.

When the whistle blew and they kicked off into the air, his musing was swallowed by excitement for the match. Harry swerved low; two bludgers careened towards him, a streak of rippling black.

Rising above the others, he shielded his eyes against the sun. He couldn't catch the snitch until they were forty points in the league. This was imperative.

The high ring of the whistle still rattling in his ears, Harry listened to the commentary below. It took ten minutes for the first goal to be scored. The Gryffindor chasers were dominating the quaffle (two blonde boys who looked like brothers, and a small, sharp-faced girl with hair in a ponytail), but Alphard blocked their attacks with ruthless efficiency. The crowd would swell with noise and then break

off into disappointed calls, a routine that carried on for the first ten minutes of the game.

The Gryffindor Seeker in the corner of his eye, Harry watched Abraxas speed down the pitch. He had the quaffle—*yes*—the Slytherin stands were cautiously silent; a streak of scarlet and emerald and someone flying as fast as they could —

The Slytherins roared in triumph and Harry rose back into the air. The other seeker, Joe Macmillan, was a wiry boy with wide-set eyes and buzzed hair. When Harry nodded to him, he pursed his lips and tightened his hold on his broomstick, speeding away.

With the sun beating relentlessly against their necks, it was difficult to see very much at all. Twice Harry flew down to examine what could have potentially been the snitch and came back unsuccessful. Each time he was followed by Joe.

Fifty minutes into the game, Harry spotted the snitch. The Slytherins were thirty points in the lead —no one had scored for the last half an hour and both teams looked ruddy and dishevelled—and there it was, a foot from the Gryffindor stands.

Harry looked at Joe and pretended he hadn't seen anything but it was no good.

Joe kicked off towards the ground and Harry cursed, following behind him. He couldn't catch the snitch yet, and he had to somehow prevent Joe from doing it too. Blood roaring in his ears, the stands a streaky blur, Harry dipped the broomstick and overtook.

Saying a silent prayer, he steered into Joe's path, whose broomstick lurched, his eyes going wide. At the last second, Harry dove out of the way and Joe sped towards the ground, towards a snitch that was no longer in sight …

The Gryffindors began to roar. With a thunderous expression, Joe turned to Harry. 'You almost killed me!' he spat. 'Foul! Foul!'

But it wasn't a foul: Harry hadn't intentionally collided with the other player, no matter how close they had gotten. Swearing furiously, Joe rose out of sight and Harry followed. The stands were going mental but the commentator praised Harry's daring move, causing the Gryffindors to boo.

A moment later there was thunderous applause. Harry's heart sank

when he saw it: ten points to Gryffindor, leaving Slytherin only twenty in the lead.

‘You may catch the snitch but you’re not going to win this thing,’ Joe told him. ‘And you’ll only catch the snitch if you cheat again, just like the rest of your team.’

‘We’ll see,’ Harry said, smiling sunnily. ‘Try and stay in the sky this time, yeah?’

They played for another hour before the referee called half-time. The score was one hundred-eighty to Slytherin and the stands were getting restless. The players barely had time to get a drink —Alphard advising them to play their hardest and ignore the commentary— before the whistle blew again. The second he rose into the air, Harry spotted the snitch, a dozen metres from Joe’s head.

His heart sank. Harry dived towards the ground as fast as he could and Joe took the bait. A bludger rocketed towards him, and he had to roll his broom upside down to avoid it.

When they rose, Joe was glaring, but the snitch was no longer in sight. Harry’s hair was plastered to his forehead, and there were only so many times he could keep avoiding the snitch. At one point —that little golden ball hovering blatantly before them—he was forced to whack into Joe, steering them both off course. The foul meant a penalty for Gryffindor: a penalty they scored.

‘Impressive flying from Potter,’ the commentator said, ‘but how long can he keep this up?’

It wasn’t for another half an hour that Slytherin were forty points in the lead. Harry didn’t even have to pay attention to the match to know; the Slytherin stands went wild, washing out the sound from Gryffindor. Joe started tailing Harry more desperately, who decided to do some swoops and dives to throw him off.

When he spotted the snitch —on the opposite side of the pitch, near the Slytherin hoops—it was entirely by accident. Harry only had a second head-start; the crowd had spotted it too and Joe was racing after him, towards that tiny golden ball …

Wind whipping in his ears, Harry swerved to avoid a bludger. The snitch was rising higher, straight into the dazzling sunlight. He followed, flattening himself onto the broomstick, leaning forward...

And two Gryffindor chasers flew in front of him. Harry swerved at the last second, but now a beater was before him, large, scarlet, entirely blocking his path.

Tilting his broomstick, Harry dived sharply; he heard a gasp; the brush of robes breezing past him; Joe level with him; Joe passing.

Harry twisted his way through the three chasers again. He was flying on instinct, almost colliding with the entire Gryffindor team as they tried to block him. The snitch was right in sight — the snitch was the only thing that mattered —right there, a fraction away—

The bludger came from nowhere. Harry swerved but it was too late: noise exploded in his ears, his shoulder blossomed with pain, and he skidded, fighting with the hold of his broomstick. There was a crunch and a sickening sensation; Harry gritted his teeth, forcing himself to fly on, one-handed.

The collision had stalled Joe. They were neck in neck now and the path was clear. Harry leaned forward, removing his hands from the broomstick, ignoring the pain in his shoulder…

When his fingers closed around the snitch, the whistle blew. It was hard to focus on the roar of the crowd. Harry flew to the ground as normally as he could and landed with a stagger.

The pain in his shoulder was making everything swimmy. He squeezed the wiggling snitch and raised it absently into the air.

‘HARRY!’

Alphard’s face was alight with triumph and Harry grinned. A second later, the rest of the team were flocking him. ‘That was insane!’ Abraxas yelled, thumping Harry on the back. ‘We won! We actually won!’

Harry couldn’t help the pained noise he made. His legs wobbled and Alphard grabbed his good shoulder, steadying him.

‘Sorry, sorry, I forgot,’ Abraxas said.

The voices of the team were merging. Harry bit his lip against the pain, aware that he was still on the pitch, that the entirety of Hogwarts was watching him.

A moment later, the referee was shoving through the Slytherins.

‘Unbutton that for me will you, Mr Potter… there we go… I’ll have to pop that back in place…’

Harry winced at the snap of his shoulder. He flexed his arm, the pain abiding, and thanked her.

‘That was mental!’ Abraxas said. ‘I didn’t know you could fly like that. And while the Gryffindors were blocking you, we got two more goals in. Pretty nice, yeah?’

Harry laughed in agreement. Still dizzy with adrenaline, still clasping the snitch, they made their way to the changing rooms and away from the thunderous crowd.

‘I thought you would fall off your broomstick,’ Cygnus said, kicking off his shoes. ‘I would have.’

Harry didn’t tell them how similar the encounter was to his second year when he had been tailed by the rogue bludger. He was too happy.

When they finished in the changing rooms and made their way to the dungeons, everyone wanted to congratulate Harry. He shook over a dozen hands, recounted the story of his Wronski Feint five times, and had a bottle of firewhiskey thrust at him by a beaming Lucretia.

The common room was decorated in celebration: a glossy emerald and silver banner hung over the fireplace, and another one was draped over the marble stairs. There were two long tables lined with food and drinks (bowls of crisps, Honeydukes Finest Chocolate, sandwiches from the kitchens, chilled bottles of butterbeer and pumpkin juice), and music wafted from a battered radio atop the mantelpiece.

Students clustered in the centre of the room: the sofas had been pushed to the fringes, where the lights were dimmed and flickering. Harry wove through the crowd (nice flying, mate; good job, Potter), and found Belinda.

She was wearing a scarf in the Slytherin colours and clutching a bottle of butterbeer loosely in her hands.

‘Fancy sharing?’ she said, pointing at the firewhiskey Lucretia had given him.

Harry handed it over.

‘You didn’t fall to your death, which was impressive. I think Professor Slughorn will want your autograph after this though.’

‘He isn’t here, is he?’

‘Not yet. But he usually comes by in the evening.’ She grinned. ‘Anyway, Harry, enough about him. We *won.* Can you believe it?’

The party went on well into the evening. At six o'clock Professor Slughorn arrived, just as Belinda had predicted. By that point, Alphard was so drunk that he hugged Professor Slughorn, who —rather teary-eyed—patted him on the back. Harry had his hand shaken vigorously, and his praise loudly proclaimed. Pink-cheeked, unable to stop grinning, he easily fell into conversation with Professor Slughorn.

It seemed as though nothing could ruin his good mood. The energy of the room was contagious. Students swayed to the music or stood in small groups, chatting. Sitting down for the first time since the match had ended, Harry watched Abraxas, who looked very drunk and happy, and Belinda, conversing with Orion Black near the tables.

‘Congratulations,’ Tom said, flinging himself onto the sofa beside Harry.

The smile slid straight from Harry’s face. It had been almost a week since he had found Tom drunk, and ever since then, Tom had only eyed him oddly, looking pensive at strange moments and frustrated at others.

‘Thanks,’ Harry said. When he looked at Tom, his throat caught. He shifted, the lightness in his chest dissolving instantly.

Neither of them said anything. Tom’s foot was tapping; Harry stared at it, his mouth dry, and waited for him to speak.

‘Did you want something,’ he began, ‘or…’

Tom’s eyes snapped up. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I wanted to talk to you.’

Harry licked his lips. Despite the fact they had had this conversation several times, he couldn’t manage to tell Tom to go.

‘About?’ His lips twitched. ‘My incredible flying?’

Tom’s face did something funny. And then he said, ‘I won’t become Voldemort,’ in a perfectly level voice.

Harry blinked. For one wild second, he was sure the voice had come from within his own mind. It was the only thing that made sense.

‘What?’ he managed to choke out, feeling like he had been clubbed over the head.

‘You said I had to choose. So I did. I chose. I won’t kill people, or have the Death Eaters, or take over Britain through violent means—’

‘Through violent means,’ Harry repeated, and laughed, feeling very dizzy.

‘Or at all, if you want.’

They stared at each other. The noise of the party had faded into the background, and Tom looked too calm, too still, too emotionless. Only his hands betrayed him: they were digging into the material of his robes, balling up the fabric.

‘You…’ Harry began. He didn’t recognise his own voice. ‘You’re not joking, are you?’

‘No, I’m not joking. *Really*, Harry.’

‘Sorry, I…’ Harry sucked in a breath. Stared. ‘You’ll really give up the Death Eaters?’

‘How many times do you want me to say it? It’s not… they’re not … it’s not even a choice.’

Harry stared at Tom’s face—at his nervous, adamant face, his twitching hands, his restless feet—and pulled him forward by the collar into a kiss.

For a second, Tom froze. His fingers jumped to Harry’s jaw, tugging him closer, and then he kissed him back, no less intensely.

Harry’s fingers loosened from around Tom’s tie and moved to the back of his neck. He gripped Tom’s shoulder—moving as close as he physically could without falling into Tom’s lap— and insistently parted his lips.

Tom laughed against his mouth.

It was Tom. *Tom.* Harry felt drunk on it. Elated. The warm heat of Tom's mouth against his own, the slide of his tongue, his hands cupping Harry's jaw and stroking his cheek.

Harry drew Tom's bottom lip into his mouth, who made a small noise in his throat. Harry groaned at it, leaning forward for better access, not breaking away.

When they eventually did part — breathing heavily and glassy-eyed— Harry felt dazed. Tom's tie was askew; his hands were fisted in Harry's robes and his cheekbones were mottled pink.

Harry cleared his throat. 'I forgot we're in the common room,' he said, his face warming. He couldn't tear his eyes away from Tom to look around.

Tom's lips twitched. 'You have no impulse control, that's why.'

'I do,' Harry said, 'that's why I *stopped.'*

'Your expression says otherwise.'

But Tom's eyes were as dark as Harry's and unable to stop flickering to his mouth.

'Dorm?' he said, watching Harry steadily.

Harry scrambled up so fast he almost tripped over the mat. He wanted to kiss Tom again, could barely help himself as they made their way up the stairs (a half-crumpled green banner, firewhiskey sticky on the wooden floor, that warmth blossoming in his chest, that inability to stop grinning).

With the door closed, the music of the common room faded away. Harry turned to Tom, his heart spiking.

'Why'd you change your mind?' he said, quieter than he had intended and more uncertain. 'It was the match, wasn't it? You were secretly impressed.'

'Yes,' Tom said, taking a step closer. 'But really, it was you or Voldemort, and' —he shrugged— 'you're the better option.'

Harry snorted. 'Thank you?'

‘I was going to tell you earlier but —’ a hand wave— ‘it was never the right time. You were always at quidditch practice, or with Weasley and Granger. And I don’t make reckless decisions like you do.’

‘Clearly,’ Harry remarked, glancing at Tom’s mouth again. ‘So really, you were scared.’

‘I was *not*—’

He looked so vehement that Harry laughed, loudly, and Tom yanked him forward and shut him up. Harry’s laughter died as he kissed Tom back. He smiled against his mouth, pulled back for a second, and said, ‘I really missed you.’

Tom blinked at him. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah, and …’ Tom’s face was very close. ‘I don’t want you to give it all up. Just don’t kill people. Or have the Death Eaters, and the whole pure-blood thing. As long as people aren’t being harmed’ —he chewed his lip— ‘I don’t care what you do, Tom.’

Tom was staring at him, a hand coiled around Harry’s tie.

‘I was too pessimistic about the whole thing. You haven’t done any of the things Voldemort did, not yet, and I was blaming you for them, assuming they would happen again. But we can figure something out. Right?’

Tom didn’t say anything for a second. And then, in one swift movement, he grabbed the front of Harry’s robes and shoved them backwards onto the bed.

‘Yes,’ he said, fumbling with Harry’s tie and tossing it aside. 'Yes. Definitely.'

Harry dragged him down into another kiss, impatiently unbuttoning Tom’s robes.

‘Tom,’ he breathed, kicking off his shoes and mouthing along the line of Tom’s jaw. He put his glasses on the nightstand, almost knocking over a lamp.

It seemed to take an age for them to get their robes off. Harry threw them carelessly over his trunk and flipped their position so he was leaning over Tom, legs on either side of his hips.

When he ground down against him, they both groaned. Harry was already painfully hard. When Tom's fingers wrapped around his cock, he made a whining noise in his throat, a noise which made Tom's mouth part, his dick jerk.

'I missed you too,' Tom said, before kissing him again, all warm lips and insistent hands.

Harry gasped into Tom's mouth. He was unable to keep his hands off Tom's skin —the way his stomach contracted under Harry's fingers; how his neck flushed when Harry pressed his lips to it, his skin so maddeningly pale.

'Harry,' Tom murmured, as they rocked against each other. 'You're so hot.'

He tilted Harry's head up to kiss him properly. Harry fell into it, feeling starved, rolling his hips down again, and Tom gasped; Tom wrapped his hand around Harry's cock, sinfully slow, and —

'We need to lock the door.'

Harry groaned.

'The door,' he repeated flatly, and when Tom just stared at him, got up reluctantly.

Still lying spread out on the bed, Tom watched him with dark eyes. He was flushed from his cheekbones to his chest, his cock hard and leaking against his stomach.

Harry muttered in parseltongue to the door and —almost tripping over a pair of shoes in his haste—stumbled back.

'I love when you speak parseltongue,' Tom said, pulling Harry back down on top of him.

'That's why you made me get up?'

'That,' Tom agreed, one of his hands wandering down Harry's back to squeeze his butt. 'And I wanted to see your arse too.'

Harry's laughter was swallowed by a groan when Tom wrapped a hand around his painfully hard cock. He was unable to help the needy noise that came from his mouth. It had been so long that even the slight pressure had him gripping Tom's shoulder. He mouthed along

Tom's jaw to hide a moan and dragged him back into another heated kiss.

It was too much, too soon, and he was going to come if Tom didn't stop touching him; touching him in that slow, teasing way, so different to the desperate way he ground against Harry.

'Tom,' Harry said, reluctantly removing Tom's hand from his cock. The way Tom was looking at him made his head spin, and he shifted down the bed, his breath catching.

Tom's face was flushed. His hair was mussed from where Harry had run his hands through it, and he had a faint pink mark at the hollow of his throat.

Under Harry's hands, his stomach contracted. Harry kissed his hip bone. His other one. Settled between his legs.

'Fuck, Harry,' Tom said, voice low and ragged. 'I want to fuck you *so* badly.'

Harry swallowed. 'In a minute,' he said. 'I need to —I mean, I want to —'

He was not telling Tom how badly he wanted his dick in his mouth, no matter how true it was. He wet his lips —Tom made a small shallow noise —and thumbed over the head of Tom's cock.

At the way Tom's breath hitched, the way he fisted at the bedsheet, one long pale hand tight, Harry glanced up. He couldn't hold off, tease him, do anything except lean down, take him into his mouth, and listen to the way Tom groaned.

'Shit,' Tom said. 'Shit, shit, *shit*.'

The sound went straight to Harry's dick. He hummed around Tom's cock, who released the bed sheets at once and clutched Harry's hair.

'You're so hot. Do you have any idea how stupidly attractive you are? And your mouth —'

Harry swallowed around his length. Tom moaned again, a long, low sound, so shamelessly that Harry's cheeks heated. He was so hard it hurt, and the way Tom's fingers were scraping against his scalp didn't help; the way he was staring at Harry as if he had hung the moon and stars.

‘Do you have any idea how much I’ve thought about you?’ Tom’s hips jerked involuntarily. Harry took him in deeper, tonguing over the head. ‘And every time fucking Conor Burke looks at you —I want to’ —a moan— ‘rip his head off his *stupid* body.’

Harry choked and Tom eased him back.

‘You always were jealous,’ Harry said, sucking the head of his cock and taking it back into his mouth.

‘*Harry,’* Tom said, and it was such a desperate noise that Harry knew he was going to come soon. He pulled off before Tom did so; Tom gave him a frustrated look and practically dragged him up the bed.

‘Come here,’ he breathed, and he was flipping their position so that Harry lay flat on his back. He pressed a kiss to Harry’s clavicle; scraped his teeth over the delicate skin of his neck.

Harry gasped, so muggy-headed that he felt drunk. When Tom eased his weight off him, he groaned.

‘Can you just fuck me already?’

He watched Tom fumble around for his wand, his hair hanging in his face. Impatiently, Harry snatched up one of the pillows and placed it under his hips.

‘In a minute,’ Tom said, murmuring a spell under his breath. When he pressed a lube-slick finger into him, Harry’s breath caught.

‘Tom,’ he said quietly. Tom was staring at him, dark-eyed, too intense. Harry glanced away, flushing, and then groaned when that finger crooked and pressed against a spot that made the world tilt.

‘You’re so tight,’ Tom said. ‘You’re so tight, it’s ridiculous.’

He added another finger, curling it in a way that made Harry curse. He bit back a moan but Tom heard it anyway.

Harry watched him smirk.

‘If I’m so *tight,’* he said, trying not to grind down against Tom’s hand, ‘then can I fuck you instead?’

His attempt at getting a reaction worked: Tom’s eyes widened.

‘I don’t think you could handle it,’ he said, ignoring the goading way

Harry was watching him. He added another finger and Harry winced at the stretch.

‘Do you deliberately try to annoy me?’ Harry said, as Tom’s lips twitched.

‘Does it work?’

Tom touched Harry’s cock, like he was unable to help himself. Harry jerked pathetically at the sensation, unable to prevent a moan.

‘You’re a bastard,’ he breathed. ‘I forgot what a bastard you are.’

‘You like it, really.’

‘I …’ Harry was never going to get control of the situation, not with the way Tom was stroking him off, three knuckles deep inside him. ‘I could definitely handle fucking you.’

Tom hummed. ‘For sure.’

‘I *could.* You’re just so obsessed with the idea of having control —’

Tom’s eyebrows arched. ‘It’s adorable how you think I wouldn’t have control in this proposed scenario.’

Harry groaned again, his head swimming with the thought. He was going to come if this continued, all of his own stomach. He was unable to look away from the way Tom’s long fingers were wrapped around his length. Tom, who looked flushed and dishevelled and impatient.

‘Can you—’ Harry began, and Tom pulled his fingers out so fast that Harry’s mind reeled.

When he felt the first press of Tom’s lube-slick cock, he hooked his leg around Tom’s back.

‘God,’ Tom said, a hand splayed over Harry’s hip. ‘You feel —you—’

His eyes were half-shut. When the head of his cock brushed past Harry’s rim, he bit down on his bottom lip. Harry could tell he was trying to hold back. Despite the way the stretch burned, how full he felt, how overwhelmed, Harry gritted his teeth and said, ‘just do it, Tom. *Please.*’

Tom thrust forward in one single motion and the air was knocked from Harry’s lungs.

‘Are you alright?’ Tom asked at once, mouthing along Harry’s neck. He didn’t move for a moment, though his face was screwed up, his grip on Harry’s hip so tight it hurt.

Muggy with desire, achingly hard, Harry felt the pain dull into the background. He eased Tom down into another kiss, hot and open-mouthed, and pulled away to nod.

‘You can move,’ Harry said. ‘Please.’

Tom eased out and thrust forward slowly, a sound escaping his throat. It made Harry’s cock twitch; made him grip the sheet hard in his fist and drag Tom even closer.

‘You feel *great,’* Tom breathed, murmuring it in Harry’s ear.

Harry’s heart spiked. There was something overwhelming about Tom this close, Tom slowly fucking into him, filling him entirely. Harry choked on the enormity of his own feelings —they were heady, overwhelming, and with the potential to shatter the desperate way Tom was looking at him.

He kissed Tom instead: his cheek, his mouth, the pale span of his jaw, and when Tom slammed into him again, it was hard enough that Harry groaned. His head fell back against the pillow. He made a small, desperate noise, his eyes closing.

‘Oh god, Tom,’ he breathed. ‘I missed you so much, you have no idea.’

Tom was fucking him properly then, in long, steady thrusts that made Harry gasp each time he pulled out. Tom made a low noise of agreement, slamming back into him, so hard their skin slapped together.

‘I dreamed about fucking you,’ Tom said. ‘Even when you removed the horcrux and I almost wanted to kill you. When we’—a moan— ‘didn’t even speak for weeks. I want you so badly, Harry. I want—’

Harry gasped. He lifted his leg to hook over Tom’s shoulder and they both moaned.

‘Harry,’ Tom breathed, drawing the name out. ‘Fuck, Harry.’

When he slammed into him, he pressed against that spot that made Harry moan. Harry could feel Tom’s breath against his own —ragged,

heavy exhales punctuating the air; heat, a millimetre from his face — and the tickle of Tom's hair as it fell against his cheek.

Tom kept moaning into his ear, and each word made Harry's cock ache. The reverberations of his moans were sending heat straight through Harry's gut, forcing him to bite back a whimper and battle with the desire to kiss Tom or listen to him.

'Wish I could fuck you *all day.'*

Tom took Harry's earlobe between his teeth, gave his cock one teasing stroke, and Harry couldn't help himself:

'Let's never break up again,' he moaned.

They both shut up after that. Tom was fucking him so hard that everything began to blur. Harry tried to keep his eyes open, to drink in the image, sear it into his memory, but the pleasure was overwhelming him, darkening the edges of his vision, forcing his head back against the pillow as he let out small, broken noises. It was so much better than he had dared let himself remember.

There was nothing except Tom and their desperate, frantic rhythm. Forehead pressed against Harry's, Tom murmured into his ear. His breathing was hitched and every jerk of his hips made Harry groan.

'Can you—' Harry began, unwilling to move his hands from where they were on Tom's back. 'I need you to —'

Tom understood at once. When he wrapped a hand around Harry's cock, stroking him long and indulgently, Harry's eyes squeezed shut.

'Oh fuck, Harry,' Tom breathed.

Harry placed a sloppy kiss on his jaw. Another one to his lips.

'You feel so good, it's insane. You're so good. You're so—'

Harry was so close that he whined, digging into Tom's back so hard he must have left marks. Tom's rhythm was faltering, his hips slamming forward, a garbled stream of praise spilling from his mouth.

'Tom,' Harry groaned, blind to everything but the pleasure building in his gut. 'I missed you so much. Tom, I—I—'

Tom's rhythm faltered. He moaned loudly, unabashedly, right against Harry's ear. It only took half a dozen strokes for Harry to follow.

The force of his orgasm was almost painful. He tightened his legs around Tom's back and spilled all over his own stomach in several bursts. His legs trembled. He was flushed all over, sweaty, gasping against Tom's mouth.

'Jesus, Harry,' Tom said, collapsing on top of him. His damp forehead was pressed against Harry's and the weight of his body was heavy and warm.

Harry kissed the place where Tom's pulse hammered, releasing the grip on his shoulder.

After a moment, Tom made to pull out.

'Wait,' Harry said, tightening his calves around Tom's back.

Tom's lips twitched as he complied.

Unable to process the fact that things would become real once Tom eased off him, Harry revelled in the fuzzy aftermath. He absently kissed Tom's twitching mouth and stroked his soft hair.

They didn't say anything for a long moment. Tom kissed him properly, open-mouthed, hot, and Harry's spent dick gave an interested twitch. Eventually though, when their breathing evened out and the sticky mess of cum on Harry's stomach became harder to ignore, Tom pulled out, vanished it, and flopped down beside him.

Harry rolled onto his side.

There wasn't room in the bed for the two of them to lie without touching. Tom's arm brushed his, coated in a sheen of sweat, and unbearably warm.

'Did you mean what you said?' Harry asked, stroking his finger over the veins in Tom's wrist. 'About Voldemort?'

'Obviously,' Tom said. 'Why, do you think I said it just to have sex with you?'

'No, I…' Harry's lips twitched. 'I suppose it doesn't matter.'

They looked at each other. Harry didn't need to voice his thoughts — they seemed to hang there, blatant, enormous —and so he reached out a hand to touch Tom's chest.

Under his fingers, Tom's skin was hot. Harry traced down his sternum,

and over to the steady beat of his heart.

‘What are you doing?’

Harry didn’t respond. He shifted forward, hooking his leg around Tom’s and drawing him closer, right into a sweaty embrace.

‘Harry,’ Tom began, his voice slightly high.

Harry laughed against his neck. ‘Don’t worry about it,’ he said, curling his arm around Tom’s waist. ‘I won’t tell anyone.’

‘That *you’re* hugging me?’

Harry paused. ‘Shut up.’

At that, Tom relaxed. The press of his bare chest was pleasant against Harry’s own, as was the faint scent of his shampoo. Harry could feel his grin and tried to scowl but ended up smiling.

‘You’re really warm,’ Tom said, stroking Harry’s bicep. He ghosted his fingers over his shoulder, where a mottled green bruise was blooming. ‘That bludger looked bad. Did it fracture?’

‘Yeah.’ Harry’s insides warmed at the thought of Tom watching the match. ‘It’s alright though.’

Tom hummed. Now that Harry had initiated it, he seemed quite content to lie there, while Harry curled around him.

‘I’m not apologising to Hagrid or anything like that,’ Tom said. ‘I haven’t suddenly become a good person.’

Harry laughed. ‘You’re still a twisted bastard,’ he agreed.

‘Exactly.’

Harry smiled at him, slow and teasing, and pressed his lips lightly to Tom’s jaw.

In response, Tom stroked his hair. Harry’s eyelids fluttered at the sensation — Tom’s fingers against his scalp, smoothing back his hair, brushing his fringe from his eyes.

They both hesitated.

‘It’s alright,’ Harry said, pushing the rest of his hair out of the way.

‘You can look at it if you want.’

Tom reached out at once, tracing the outline of Harry’s scar. ‘It’s faded a lot,’ he remarked, and there was something in his eyes that made Harry swallow.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was removing it. But it never made a difference to me. Not in the way I feel.’ He looked at Tom. Didn’t say it, didn’t dare disturb the peace between them. ‘I don’t think anything would.’

Tom was so close that Harry could see every fleck of crimson in his irises. His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. His mouth parted, breathing warm air near Harry’s cheek.

‘That’s really sappy,’ was what he eventually came out with.

Harry laughed, a real, genuine laugh, that made Tom laugh too. They lay there for another moment, grinning, and Harry sat up and put on his glasses.

They got dressed hastily. Harry didn’t tell Tom how wrecked he looked: hair rumpled, eyes dark, swollen, reddened lips. He imagined that he only looked worse. When they eventually left the dorm (Harry making sure the room didn’t reek of sex), the common room was too busy for anyone to pay them much attention.

Music was still blaring from the radio atop the mantelpiece. The room was dim, flickering in the coloured lights, and strewn with plastic cups and wrappers.

‘Do you want to get out of here?’ Tom said, as they slipped through the crowd. Harry adjusted his tie as discreetly as he could.

It came to him then, all at once. He looked at the fifth-years, slurring verses and swaying in the middle of the common room. The quidditch banner hanging over the fireplace, glinting emerald and silver, and then finally at Tom.

There were so many things left to say, so many things that hung between them, unvoiced and expectant. But the common room was loud and looking at Tom made something bloom in Harry’s chest, warm and wonderfully light. He let the music wash over him; let the pressure in his chest deflate and dwindle and ease off entirely.

Harry smiled.

‘Alright,’ he said and they made their way into the hall, the music of the party fading away.

The End

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Harry woke, there was an arm slung over his chest. He twisted his head to the right and banged into another face: Tom, blurry and asleep, who made an annoyed noise and flung his leg over Harry's, pinning him in place.

Harry lay still, trying not to laugh. Tom's presence made all traces of sleep disappear at once and the memories came crashing back. They were squashed close in Harry's four-poster, and Tom's head was pressed into the crook of Harry's neck, a position he seemed to favour. It was something Harry had tried not to let himself think about for too long — those blurry mornings, Tom, all loose-limbed and touchy — because it hurt too much to dwell on.

Now, he felt strangely giddy. He couldn't sleep, not with Tom draped over him, warm and solid. He wiggled an arm free and draped it over Tom's shoulder. With the other, he stroked Tom's bare forearm, who made a low, contented noise and burrowed further into Harry's side.

It must have been early. The dormitory was very quiet and cast in dim light. With a jolt, Harry remembered the party the night before. He focused on the sensation of Tom's breathing and the heavy weight of his leg tangled with Harry's own. Though he wasn't tired any longer, he lay there, trying not to move or do anything that would wake Tom. But as he listened to Tom's steady, even breaths — who murmured something absently against Harry's neck, wiggling closer—he drifted off.

When Harry woke again, it was brighter and he was hanging off the bed. Tom, a leg flung out, was gripping his t-shirt and the blankets were twisted around them.

This time, Harry shoved Tom away without any qualms and shifted back onto the bed.

'Stop moving,' Tom muttered, his voice thick with sleep. His eyebrows were furrowed. He was still gripping Harry's t-shirt tightly in one hand, the other splayed between them.

'Move over then,' Harry said, lifting Tom's hand out of the way. His

neck was cricked. His t-shirt had ridden up his back, leaving it cold. ‘Git.’

Tom pulled Harry closer, ignoring the instruction. When Harry complied, Tom’s eyes opened a fraction, as if in surprise.

They both seemed to gain awareness at the same time.

‘Morning,’ Harry said, watching the fog of sleep vanish from Tom’s face. He swallowed, slightly nervous, while Tom continued to stare at him.

‘Harry,’ Tom said, as if he was testing the name out. His voice was rough. He blinked. ‘What time is it?’

‘It’s’—Harry checked his clock— ‘nearly eight.’

‘Nearly eight,’ Tom repeated, frowning. ‘That’s so early.’

Harry laughed as quietly as he could. ‘For you, maybe.’

Tom gave him an unimpressed look. They were lying close, facing each other, and this small act made Harry’s heart thunder. Even after everything they had said, everything that had happened, the act of lying there felt different now, no longer shrouded by the jubilance of the party or the frantic impulses of the night before.

‘You look like you’re freaking out,’ Tom said.

‘I’m not freaking out.’

‘No?’ His lips twitched. ‘Do I intimidate you?’

Harry scowled. ‘You don’t *intimidate* me.’ And he leaned forward and kissed him to prove it.

Tom’s hand flew to Harry’s jaw, drawing him closer. What had been light and straight to the point was now hard and insistent. While still kissing him, Tom found his wand and waved it at the curtains, sealing the noise inside.

‘Your heart’s really fast,’ Tom murmured, pulling back and kissing Harry’s jaw.

‘What, are you a doctor now?’

Tom snorted. He was leaning over Harry, heavy and warm.

Harry knew his heart was thundering; Tom, lips curved into a wicked smile, only made it worse.

‘You were so nice yesterday,’ Harry breathed. ‘I should have known it wouldn’t last.’

Tom’s grin widened. He was pressed against Harry’s body in an intentionally frustrating way; Harry couldn’t shift against him no matter how badly he wanted to, and Tom knew it.

‘Careful,’ Tom said, dragging a finger over Harry’s bottom lip. ‘That sounded awfully like an insult.’ He lifted some of his weight off. ‘Was it?’

‘No,’ Harry said, and he hadn’t meant to play this game of control with Tom but he would have done anything Tom wanted then, anything at all. ‘Please —’

‘Please what?’ Tom said, his dark eyes boring into Harry’s.

‘Please grind your dick against mine and shut the hell up.’

Tom’s eyes widened ever so slightly. Harry caught the flash of surprise and grinned.

‘So crude,’ Tom said, but nevertheless shifted against him. Harry groaned at the friction, biting his lip at the last moment.

‘And to think I was going to show you how *nice* I am.’

Harry’s breath sucked inwards. ‘You were?’ he said, his voice cracking.

Tom hummed. ‘I could,’ he said, very close to Harry’s ear. He rocked his hips. Another desperate gasp came unwillingly from Harry’s mouth.

For once, he didn’t try to take control of the situation. He’d let Tom have control, let him do whatever he wanted — for now.

‘You should definitely do that,’ Harry breathed. His pulse was hammering. He was shamelessly, painfully hard but so was Tom.

Tom smirked.

And then he was pinning Harry’s arms behind his head and kissing him, in such an intense way that Harry moaned.

‘Look at you,’ Tom said. His hand had crept under Harry’s t-shirt and was splayed across his chest. ‘How annoyed does it make you to not be able to do anything?’

‘It doesn’t bother me,’ Harry lied. ‘I’m incredibly lazy.’

Tom’s lips twitched but he didn’t release Harry’s arms. Instead, smiling in a way that was decidedly wicked, he hitched Harry’s underwear down his thighs and palmed over his cock.

Harry bit his lip. He was so hard it was almost embarrassing. ‘Tom,’ he breathed, and resisted the urge to wiggle his arms free. He knew Tom would prefer if he didn’t resist — and sure enough, Tom’s lips curved upwards (he was so dazzling that Harry felt winded again), and he lazily stroked Harry off.

Harry bit down on his lip. With the curtains closed, and the noise muffled, something about the whole thing seemed surreal. He watched Tom’s hand — long, slender fingers — thumb over his cock again and again, slow and languid.

‘Do you want me to—’ Harry began, wiggling his arms from where Tom had pinned them.

Tom shook his head. He released Harry’s arms and shifted down the bed in one smooth motion.

Harry’s heart hammered. ‘Tom,’ he began weakly, feeling like all the air had been knocked from his lungs. He whispered it, despite the charm.

‘Yes?’

Tom glanced up, his tongue darting out to lick his bottom lip. Harry watched the movement as if in a trance.

‘Do you want me to suck your dick or not?’

Harry’s mouth parted. ‘Yeah,’ he breathed, swallowing nervously. ‘I really, really do.’

Tom grinned — a flash of white teeth — and took Harry’s cock back into his hand. His mouth was barely a fraction from the head when he paused, warm breath so close that Harry could feel it.

‘You’re sadistic,’ Harry said, sounding a lot fonder than he had meant

to.

‘And you get riled up so easily. I could probably look at your dick for long enough and you’d come.’

‘No, I wouldn’t,’ Harry began, trying not to laugh at the thought. ‘You’re so arrogant.’

‘You’re really calling me arrogant when I’m about to put your dick in my mouth?’

‘Not arrogant. Good. Great. Wonderful. Oh, god—’

His cheeks now pink, Tom took the head of Harry’s cock into his mouth. He didn’t avert his gaze as he did so: Harry’s words faded into a garbled groan.

The wet heat of Tom’s mouth was sinful and watching him — the way his cheeks hollowed and worked, the blush he couldn’t quite hide, those eyes lingering on Harry’s— was already too much.

Don't come, don’t come, don’t come.

As if hearing this internal monologue and trying to defy it, Tom took Harry’s cock deeper into his mouth. Harry imagined how Tom would laugh; how it would be over before it even began.

‘Oh god, Tom,’ he murmured. ‘Oh, god.’

Tom was sucking him off lazily. He didn’t seem to care when Harry came, or even if he did at all. It was so cruel that Harry’s toes curled.

‘I love when you blow me,’ he said. ‘I feel like you could kill me at any moment, but it’s okay. It’s worth it —’

Tom laughed around Harry’s dick and the vibration made him moan.

Tom’s rhythm was steadily, agonisingly slow, and it was making Harry light-headed. Everything about Tom’s mouth was perfect and he was unable to prevent his hips from jerking when Tom took him in deeper; unable to prevent twitching and gasping when Tom’s tongue swirled over the head.

Tom didn’t seem bothered by this; if anything, he only swallowed around him, hollowing out his cheeks.

‘Oh, god,’ Harry moaned. ‘Can I —can I touch you, please —’

Without pulling away, Tom nodded. Harry's hands flew to his hair at once and he carefully ran his fingers through it.

Tom seemed amused by the gentleness. He took Harry's cock deeper in his mouth, sucked a little firmer, his tongue sliding against the underside, until it hit the back of his throat.

That was all it took. Harry clutched Tom's hair and came with a helpless moan, unable to bottle the sound.

He shuddered for a moment, gasping, but Tom didn't pull away until he was finished. When he eventually did, Harry tugged him up the bed.

'Tom,' he breathed.

Tom's lips were slightly swollen and Harry's spent dick twitched at the sight. He stared at him, how beautiful his face was, how he still looked a little pink-cheeked and dishevelled, and asked, 'are you okay?'

Tom snorted. 'Yeah,' he said, and Harry dragged him down into a kiss, unable to hide his grin.

They kissed until they were both breathless and Harry reached down to wrap a hand around Tom's cock, who groaned against Harry's mouth until he came.

When they were finished and lay there, breathing heavily, Harry reached out and stroked Tom's arm. He felt warm and content in the low light of the morning. The moment could have lingered on forever and he would have lain there in the silence, his muscles relaxed, while Tom traced absent patterns on his chest.

When he did get up, the dormitory was still quiet. Tom fled to his own bed with an enormous yawn —it's eight, he repeated to Harry, pulling the curtains closed before Harry could laugh at him.

Smiling slightly, Harry made his way to the bathroom. He didn't have to face any of the Slytherins until he had showered and reached the common room. The banner over the fireplace was crumpled but the tables of food had disappeared and all other traces of the party were gone.

As he came down the stairs, a group of younger students stopped to stare at him. It took Harry a moment to remember his quidditch

victory the night before —only when one of the fifth-year prefects congratulated him did it come back.

‘Thanks,’ he said, and spotted Abraxas and Belinda with relief. They were sharing the sofa near the empty fireplace and gesturing him over eagerly.

‘Hello,’ Harry said, sinking into the armchair opposite. Belinda and Abraxas shared a look and Harry braced himself: he already knew what was coming from their conspiring grins.

‘Sleep well?’ Belinda asked.

Harry shrugged, trying to keep his face impassive. ‘Okay, I suppose. You?’

‘Where’s Tom anyway?’ Abraxas said, reaching for the Daily Prophet and avoiding Harry’s eyes. Unlike Belinda, he was already trying not to laugh.

‘In bed, I think.’

They both smirked.

‘I’ll take your word for it,’ Belinda said.

‘I’m sure you know better than us.’

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘Go on, spit it out,’ he said. ‘You’re clearly dying to.’

Their expressions turned gleeful. Belinda took a sip from her teacup to hide her grin. Abraxas, who had no such qualms, said, ‘did you and Tom make up then?’

Harry snorted, his lips curving unwillingly. ‘Is it that obvious?’

‘Well, there’s an enormous hickey on your neck for starters.’

Harry’s hand flew to it at once and Belinda smirked.

‘Kidding,’ she said. ‘I saw you snogging him.’

‘And you left the common room together,’ Abraxas added.

‘It wasn’t very subtle.’

‘You *definitely* had sex.’

‘Lots of it.’

‘Probably even—’

Harry cleared his throat. ‘I hate you both,’ he said flatly. He rubbed the back of his neck. ‘Did everyone see?’

Belinda swallowed her laughter and shook her head. Abraxas, seeming to take pity on Harry, added, ‘it wasn’t everyone. Walburga did though. She almost spat out her firewhiskey when she saw you. It was hilarious.’

‘Sounds it,’ Harry said, his cheeks heating.

‘And you nearly killed Conor Burke. He honestly looked ready to faint.’

‘So, basically everyone saw it?’

Belinda shrugged indifferently and Harry groaned. He could already imagine the comments he was going to get; jokes and jabs and smirks that no one would dare submit Tom to.

‘Was it a one-time thing?’ Abraxas asked, ‘or are you together now?’

Harry felt that warmth settle in his chest again. Despite the teasing, despite the fact he would probably be at the forefront of all gossip in the castle for the next month, he couldn’t find it in himself to care. A smile stretched slowly over his face: he could already imagine Professor Slughorn’s reaction.

‘I suppose we are,’ Harry said and grinned at the words. ‘I mean, if you want to call it that.’

Abraxas snorted.

‘Like you haven’t both been sulking for months.’

‘I wasn’t *sulking*—’

But when they laughed, Harry did too. He didn’t think anything could have ruined his mood then, least of all his friends, with their teasing smiles and gleaming eyes. He was too relieved.

When Tom came down to the common room, Belinda and Abraxas shut up at once. They both needed to dash to the owlery—Abraxas mumbled something about quidditch and his father and Belinda fled to the girls' dorm for parchment—leaving Harry and Tom alone.

'What's their problem?' Tom asked.

His hair was damp and tidy and he smelled like soap. Harry resisted the desire to touch him; the common room was already filling up, and while Tom would probably agree to fumbling around in the nearest broom cupboard, Harry would never live it down if they skipped breakfast.

'You don't want to know,' he said, as they made their way to the Hall.

An enormous green banner hung over the Slytherin Table. It was more animated than Harry had ever seen it and the Gryffindors, whose decoration had disappeared overnight, were shooting them withering looks. As Harry sat down, he grinned again, a knot unravelling in his chest.

It was *easy* to eat breakfast with Tom. To fall back into conversation and the casual way they used to talk. He was unable to focus on anything around him —Alphard, trying to talk Quidditch strategies; Abraxas, excitedly discussing the prophet.

Tom's voice was warmer than usual, and it had been so long since they had talked normally that Harry was unable to stop smiling. Abraxas actually kicked him under the table to get his attention at one point, and Harry, exasperated, found himself staring into the eyes of Professor Slughorn.

'Sorry, professor,' he managed, while Tom laughed under his breath. 'I didn't see you there.'

It didn't even matter that Belinda and Abraxas teased him relentlessly — he felt too content to do much more than grin.

'Dumbledore is staring at you,' Tom said, setting down his knife and fork and pushing aside his plate. 'He looks concerned.' He brightened. 'Maybe you should glare at him. Show him how you're turning dark and all that.'

‘I’m not glaring at Dumbledore,’ Harry said, and when he glanced at the Head Table, Dumbledore was indeed looking at him. ‘He doesn’t look concerned.’

‘Well, he does now.’

Harry snorted. The mention of Dumbledore had him glancing towards the Gryffindor Table. He braced himself for what he had to do, knowing that if he didn’t tell his friends the truth, they would piece it together themselves, which would only be worse.

Tom, too, was looking at Ron and Hermione apprehensively.

‘I don’t care how mad they get,’ Harry said. ‘I’m not going to change my mind.’

‘You’re much too stubborn for that,’ Tom said, though his shoulders relaxed a bit and he stopped shooting them such dark looks.

When breakfast was over, Harry squared his shoulders and made his way across the Hall. Several of the Gryffindor quidditch players shot him dirty looks but Ron brightened, already half out of his chair.

‘Nice catch,’ he said, low enough that his house-mates didn’t hear. ‘I knew you’d get the snitch. You always do.’

Hermione was already gathering her bag. She congratulated him right in front of the other Gryffindors —loud and defiant—and it made Harry’s heart sink.

‘Thanks,’ he said, trying not to betray his nerves. They were so nice that he felt awful.

As they made their way into the corridor, Ron prattled on about the match: bit of a sore spot for us right now; your house really likes rubbing it in.

‘Did the Slytherins have a party?’ Hermione asked as they rounded the nearest corridor, reaching the marble staircase. ‘And do you fancy going to the library this morning? Or were you up late?’

‘The library’s fine,’ Harry said. ‘And there was a party. Quite a decent one, actually. But’—he sucked in a breath— ‘I have to tell you something.’

The corridor was loud but all Harry could hear was his heart racing.

Ron and Hermione had stopped and were both looking at him curiously. There was no hint of suspicion on their faces, no disapproval, and Harry swallowed the lump rising in his throat.

'Go on,' Ron said.

Harry looked at the corridor leading to the Great Hall and the row of gleaming suits of armour. He looked at Hermione, her hair tied back in a plait; Ron, already sunburnt and red.

'I made up with Tom,' he said, the words coming out in a great rush.

There was a beat of silence and Ron frowned.

'You what?'

'Oh, Harry,' Hermione said, with something like pity in her voice. 'Why? You were doing so well, and you removed the horcrux, and you even said it was better this way. It will only be worse in the long run.'

'And what do you mean by made up?' Ron asked. 'Are you talking, are you friends, are you dating?'

Harry winced. 'Yeah,' he said. 'We are.'

His eyebrows shot upwards. 'You didn't drink anything funny at that party, did you?'

'No. I know it sounds crazy —'

They were looking at him in disbelief.

'—But we talked about it, and he said he wouldn't become Voldemort.'

Ron and Hermione paused.

'Riddle said that?' Ron scoffed. 'How do you know he's not messing with you?'

Harry took a breath. 'I believe him,' he said. 'I know it sounds crazy, and you think I'm an idiot, but I do. And I can't just live my life based on what might happen. Maybe things will change, maybe it will fall apart and end horribly but right now … there's no reason for it to. I want to work it out —or at least say I tried. I need to try.'

'What about Voldemort?' Hermione said. 'The Death Eaters? The

horcruxes? Are you going to turn a blind eye on all of that because you want to date him?'

'Of course not,' Harry said, feeling defensive. Did she really think so little of him? 'I know it's Tom. I know how easily he could lie about it, but he's not. I…'

He ran a hand through his hair. Hermione was looking at him in concern, and Ron —arms crossed, chin tilted — was as immovable as a wall.

Harry exhaled slowly and told them what Tom had said yesterday.

'It's different this time,' he said eventually. 'I'm not ignoring everything that is going to happen. And maybe you don't trust him, but I do. At least about this.'

Neither of them seemed very convinced by that.

'And I know him,' Harry added, 'so if he was lying, or he changed his mind, I'd figure it out.'

'You shouldn't have to compromise what you believe in,' Hermione said.

They had moved to one of the benches down a lone corridor. Ron wasn't sitting; he paced back and forth the corridor in silence, his steps quick and restless.

Harry rubbed the sleeve of his robes.

'I'm dating *Tom Riddle.* He's never going to be a nice person. What's the alternative? He masks his whole personality? Represses everything he is? I'm not saying Voldemort —'

They both looked ready to protest.

'—but could you just trust me to make a decision for once? I'd never condone murder, or let him treat people like shit. I haven't just changed overnight.'

A bit of frustration bled into his tone and Ron and Hermione stilled. Harry sighed, forcing down the prickle of defence, and said, 'I've already made up my mind. You hate Tom, he's a prick, I know he's a prick, and you never have to speak to him again but it's not going to change anything.'

They were silent for a moment. Harry shifted on the bench, waiting for his friends to digest the words. He had never cared what people thought of him, never cared about anyone at all apart from Ron and Hermione.

‘It’s your life,’ Hermione said finally. ‘While I don’t trust Riddle at all, it’s not up to me. You know him better than I do and well, I just have to accept that.’

‘But if he does anything to you, we will kill him. You don’t know how badly I want to punch his stupid, annoying face.’

Harry snorted. ‘I can handle Tom,’ he said.

‘And ruin my only opportunity for revenge? Not a chance.’

They sat there for a while, watching the students move back and forth along the corridor. There was a cluster of first years shivering in the courtyard, soaking up the weak sun.

‘So Riddle doesn’t care that you're not a horcrux anymore?’ Ron said.

Harry faltered at the question. He tore his eyes away from a crow, which was pecking at the remains of a sandwich in the long grass.

‘No,’ he said. ‘He’s a bit mad about it but … it’s done. And I’m still glad I did it.’

Ron hummed, as if trying to understand this. ‘Well, as long as I can still hate him, it’s fine.’

‘I was actually expecting you to become best mates, but I suppose that’ll do.’

‘Funny.’

Harry’s chest loosened. He asked Hermione if she still wanted to go to the library, and was relieved when she said yes. They made their way up the staircase, all three of them subdued. Harry studied the gilded portraits with the intensity of a first-year and when they stopped on the third floor, he shared a fleeting look with Ron.

The sound of Hermione searching for her pass to the restricted section was loud. Through the stained-glass doors, he saw the library was already dotted with students. He locked eyes with one member of the chess club, who was mid-way through a yawn. They both glanced

away quickly.

‘Found it,’ Hermione said triumphantly. Her voice dropped to a whisper as they stepped inside.

‘And by the way, I’m glad you told us about Tom. We didn’t see you at all yesterday and it would have been easy to hide it.’

‘I wouldn’t do that,’ Harry said. ‘You’d find out eventually anyway.’

‘Probably in some horrible way,’ Ron said. ‘Like going into an empty broom cupboard or spare classroom, and—*surprise!’*

‘That wouldn’t happen,’ Harry said, but Ron only made a doubtful noise.

‘Are you forgetting I have an invisibility cloak?’

‘You have a —’ He turned red. ‘Seriously, Harry? Did you have to put that thought into my head?’

‘You started it.’

‘And now I’m *picturing* it.’

Harry laughed. ‘That’s really not my fault.’

The revelation that Harry was dating Tom lingered between them the rest of the morning but Harry was optimistic that Ron and Hermione would get over it. Their suspicion would wane when it was clear Harry wasn’t being manipulated or coerced or developing a sudden passion for the Dark Arts.

At one point, Hermione brought up the Elder Wand. ‘How can you be sure he won’t take it?’ she asked, as delicately as she could.

But while Harry could never quite be sure of that fact, he was becoming certain of another: while he remained the Master of Death, the wand would only work for him.

For weeks he had mulled over his magic. The Elder Wand felt better than even the holly wand did —unyielding, fluid, attuned to his very

thoughts—but Harry never used it in public. Figuring out the Elder Wand was something that would take time —and yet that only made him more determined to explore it.

It was mid-afternoon by the time Harry went back to the common room. He left Ron and Hermione sheepishly (it was silently known that Harry was going to see Tom), and made his way down the stairs. On the second floor, he met Professor Merrythought, who congratulated him on his flying and said she hadn't seen a match like it in a very long time.

Harry's neck flushed at the praise. The words were still going through his head when he ran into Dumbledore outside the Great Hall.

'Harry,' Dumbledore said in a mild voice. He was holding a teacup in one hand and an enormous book in the other. 'It's a real shame you're not a Gryffindor.'

'What?' Harry said, his stomach dropping. Tom was right. Dumbledore *had* been staring at him. He thought Harry was disappointing and desperate and immoral and —

'Oh, you mean about the match?' A relieved grin crossed his face. 'Sorry about that.'

'We're taking the loss admirably,' Dumbledore said. 'Though your name isn't being spoken of too fondly in the common room.'

'That's alright,' Harry said. 'It was a tough match.'

'You're being modest, my boy. Professor Slughorn will be boasting for years to come, I'm afraid.'

Harry —never sure what to do with compliments —thanked him awkwardly. He wondered if Dumbledore would mention Tom, whose presence was silently hovering between them. Would he be angry? Disappointed?

The front doors of the castle were open and voices drifted from the courtyard. Harry stared into the sunlight, everything gilded and bright and expectant.

But all Dumbledore said was, 'you're looking well, Harry. I'm glad to see it.'

Harry blinked. 'Thanks, sir. I… er...'

‘I imagine it’s the sunshine,’ Dumbledore continued. ‘I’ve always been partial to the springtime myself.’

‘Something like that,’ Harry said and it passed between them, understood.

‘I’ll let you head on,’ Dumbledore said. ‘I have to meet with Professor Flitwick. We like to have a duel on Sundays — keeps us young, you know. I imagine Filius’ been practising all morning.’

Harry smiled. ‘Thanks, sir.’

As he made his way to the dungeons, he thought that things had gone a lot better than he had hoped. He was greeted by Lucretia the minute he stepped into the common room, who eyed him hopefully. She was wearing large hoop earrings and her hair was tied up in a ponytail.

‘You haven’t seen Ignatius, have you?’ she asked, springing from her seat and cornering him in the portrait hole. 'He’s mad I —um— laughed at Gryffindor losing. What a baby, right?’

‘Right,’ Harry said, trying not to laugh. ‘Are you dating now?’

Lucretia laughed. ‘He wishes. And you better not bring that idea up around Walburga.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it,’ Harry said, smiling.

She moved past him and Harry looked around. As if drawn by a force he couldn’t control, his eyes fell to Tom who was sitting near the windows talking to Alphard. When Harry made his way over, they both looked up.

‘Great match, wasn’t it, Harry?’ Alphard said. ‘How’s your shoulder?’

‘Oh, it’s fine,’ Harry said. He had inspected it that morning in the shower and found a large purple bruise from where the bludger had struck him.

‘Yeah? I really thought you’d fall off your broom with that bludger. Bones hit it so hard. A bit harsh, considering how close you were flying to him…’

‘Well, that’s quidditch,’ Harry said, and Alphard nodded solemnly.

Harry looked at Tom—he was unable to help himself—and Alphard followed his eyes.

‘Well, I’m going to find Professor Slughorn and get an extension on my essay,’ he said, standing quickly.

‘You don’t have to go,’ Harry protested.

Alphard shrugged in an exaggerated display of ease. ‘Nah, I’ll talk to you later. Bye —er—Tom.’

Tom smiled at him in response, and when Harry sat down in Alphard’s abandoned armchair, his expression turned sharp.

‘Hello,’ Tom said, watching him intensely. ‘Did you have a nice chat with Weasley and Granger?’

Despite the gleam in his eye, there was something forced about his nonchalance. Harry winced.

‘It didn’t go as badly as you think.’

‘They want to put me in Azkaban instead of outright murdering me?’

Harry’s lips twitched. ‘Well, yeah. But that’s their problem. *I* don’t want you to go to Azkaban. For now, anyway.’

‘You always say the nicest things. And Harry’—his tone was at once serious— ‘I’m never going to like them. We’ll never get along, no matter how hard you want it. I don’t care about them. I’ll *never* care about them.’

‘You sell yourself so well,’ Harry said dryly. ‘And I know that. Honestly, as long as you don’t harm each other, I don’t care.’

Tom studied him and nodded. ‘Can I annoy them at least?’

‘Your mere existence annoys them.’

‘There’s nothing mere about my existence,’ Tom said.

Harry smiled, especially when he saw the faint scowl on Tom’s face.

‘Of course not,’ he said. ‘It’s on a different level to everyone else's then?’

‘I don’t know why you’re even asking that. You know I’m going to say yes.’

Harry laughed. He really had missed him.

For the first time in months, Harry didn't wince at the thought of double potions. Instead, when he woke on Monday morning he grinned. Sleeping with Tom —sweaty and warm and elbowing him in awkward places—was so much better than sleeping alone. Tom was clingy in his sleep, always backing into Harry or sprawling on top of him. He took up two-thirds of the bed and didn't fall asleep for hours.

And yet, sometimes Harry woke early just so he could lie there, listening to Tom's even breaths. He knew Tom would tease him relentlessly if he knew, but Harry couldn't help himself: the steady thrum of Tom's heart was soothing, and he often talked in his sleep—random fragments of parseltongue; low incantations of spells.

In potions, they chatted easily. Harry could feel Ron and Hermione's eyes on his back but the dungeon was thick with steam and when he turned around, they were immersed in their work. At one point, when he was mid-way through his potion, Slughorn came down from his desk to talk to Harry about the match. It was something he had done several times that weekend, as if he still couldn't believe it.

'Here we go,' Tom breathed.

Professor Slughorn glanced between the two of them and blinked. Too late Harry realised how close they were sitting, how Tom's elbow was brushing against his, how they were both smiling a bit.

An almost comical grin stretched across Professor Slughorn's face. 'Friends again, boys?' he said, and there was no mistaking the meaningful note in his tone.

'Something like that,' Harry said, trying not to laugh.

'Good, good.' He beamed. 'I hate to see the two of you argue. Or any of my Slytherins for the matter. But especially' —he was gazing at Tom fondly — 'you two. Did you enjoy the match, Tom?'

'I always enjoy Slytherin winning, sir.'

'And didn't Harry fly well?'

'I suppose so, sir.'

‘I suppose so,’ Harry repeated, when Professor Slughorn eventually left them.

Tom laughed. ‘He’s been annoying me about you for days. I think he’s going to cave soon. There’s only so much hinting he can bear.’

‘You’re evil,’ Harry said, his lips curving upwards.

But from his desk, Professor Slughorn beamed at them and awarded Tom ten house points for “chopping his ingredients very precisely.”

As the class continued, Harry watched Tom unabashedly. They had spent so many lessons sneaking glances at each other that now Harry drank in the quiet contentment that rested between them. Tom was leafing through his textbook, his fingertips stained orange. He noticed Harry’s eyes and—without faltering—smiled at him in amusement.

Harry smiled back, his potion slipping from his mind. That warmth was blossoming in his chest—that light, unspoken thing that had blanketed the weekend and tinged the time leading up from the match. He watched Tom, his hands moving lazily, and didn’t want to shatter it.

‘My friends don’t believe that you’ll really give up your obsession with power,’ he said eventually.

Tom paused, his fingers hovering over his cauldron. He dropped the ingredients in carefully, stirred twice and turned around.

‘Your friends don’t or you don’t?’

‘They don’t. But we should still talk about it. I mean, it’s Voldemort. It’s … everything.’

‘It’s not everything. It’s only one way.’ He smiled wryly. ‘And I still want power. I don’t have to take over Britain, or have the Death Eaters, or become a Dark Lord to achieve it. I’ll never be a good person, but when you showed me your memories’—he turned back to the cauldron—‘I hated what I saw.’

Something inside Harry loosened at the words. Though he would never voice it, there was something about the idea of Tom giving it up for *him* that felt like enormous pressure. Harry didn’t want to be the only thing stopping Tom from getting what he wanted.

What if the odds didn’t tip in Harry’s favour one day? If Tom got

bored? Frustrated? Resentful?

‘Okay,’ Harry said, exhaling slowly. ‘And you were right in a way. I don’t want an ordinary life either. All normal, and boring, and good. I want *this*. And …’

Harry hesitated. It sounded awfully like a confession he didn’t want to make, not in the middle of potions class, not when they had only got back together.

‘—we’ll work something out, I’m sure. I want to.’

Tom’s lips quirked. He was looking at Harry as though he was an idiot but it wasn’t without fondness. ‘Then we’re in agreement,’ he said, turning back to his cauldron. His arm brushed Harry’s as he moved.

‘Yeah,’ Harry breathed. He nudged Tom’s leg with his foot and glanced at the front of the room: Professor Slughorn, seated behind his desk, was surveying the class. He caught Harry’s eye, blinked, and gave him a thumb’s up.

Laughing unexpectedly, Harry smiled back.

Tom was on his way to the library when he ran into Weasley and Granger. There was a book on Ancient Runes that he was next in line to borrow (once some fifth-year finished their research project), and he had been waiting all month. He made his way up the stairs, already imagining the dog-eared pages, the ink-stains, and smiled automatically at a group of younger students. He still had to deal with the Death Eaters. Perhaps he would keep up his pretence until the end of the year and slip away quietly. Connections were useful, however much his plans had changed.

It was there —idly imagining how things would unfold —that he spotted them.

Tom and Granger saw each other at the same time. Granger’s face hardened. She was holding her satchel tightly in her arms, Weasley by her side, tall and gangly.

Tom walked on, his grin sharpening.

‘Riddle,’ Weasley said, sounding like he was trying his best not to snarl.

Tom stopped, turned around and nodded. ‘Yes, Weasley?’

Weasley’s jaw worked. Now that Tom was before them —that bland expression on his face—he didn’t seem sure what to do.

‘You can drop the act,’ he managed. ‘Just because Harry thinks you’ve turned over a new leaf doesn’t mean we’re falling for it.’

Tom blinked. ‘But I have turned over a new leaf,’ he said. ‘Didn’t you hear?’

Weasley looked like he had swallowed something poisonous. ‘Cut it out,’ he said. ‘You know exactly what I mean. You’re a murderer.’

‘And I’ll regret it every day.’

‘You …’ he was turning the most fascinating shade of red. ‘Like hell you’ll regret it every day. Do you think this is funny?’

‘I wouldn’t call killing people funny, Ron. Tragic, maybe. And I’d prefer not to talk about it too much. It’s still’—a lowering of voice, a pained pause— ‘hard for me to think about.’

Granger grabbed Weasley’s shoulder, who lunged at him.

They were both stiff, Weasley’s cheeks splotched an angry red, Granger clutching her books tightly.

‘Can you cut it out?’ she said, with no less venom than her boyfriend had used.

They seemed oblivious to the fact they were standing in the middle of a corridor, in full view of whoever walked past.

Gryffindors, Tom thought. They had no tact.

‘Do you not like my new personality?’ he asked. ‘*Harry* likes it.’

Her eyes darkened. ‘Why is everything a game to you? You have to twist people around for your own sick amusement, mess with their heads, pretend—’

‘—That sounds like the old Tom,’ he interrupted. ‘I wouldn’t dream of such a thing now.’

Her jaw worked. She let go of Weasley's arm, nostrils flaring, and took a step forward.

His expression still blank, Tom waited.

But Granger didn't yell like she desperately wanted to. She took a deep breath and said, 'I know you're a liar. I don't know why Harry likes you but I swear to god, Riddle, if you keep messing with him, if you do *one thing* to even upset him, I will ruin your life. I could get you sent to Azkaban for what you did. I could destroy all your stupid little horcruxes. And I don't care how long it would take. I will do it.'

Tom gave her a thoughtful look, pretending he didn't prickle at the words. That old fear was stirring inside him, the one which said bolt, hide, wipe their memories and destroy all the evidence.

He thought of that morning. Harry, spread out on Tom's bed, smiling at him, all soft and half-asleep. The slant of his dark eyelashes against his cheek, the line of his jaw, the smattering of freckles on his flushed cheeks.

'Do you want me to break up with Harry then?' he asked.

Weasley and Granger both went still. A look passed between them—a pained, conflicted look—as they shared a silent conversation.

And Weasley said, 'yes.'

Tom smiled at that. There was something about how much they hated him, about the fact that they'd never get what they wanted, that made him feel very warm.

'That's nice,' Tom said. 'I wonder what Harry would think of that. His two best friends'—he lowered his voice— 'only want what's best for him, right?'

'Of course we do,' Hermione snapped. 'And that is not you. He may think it's you, but it's not. You'll never be good enough for him, Riddle, no matter how much you pretend you've changed.'

'No, probably not. But isn't it funny how you can't do anything about it?'

'You're disgusting,' Weasley said. 'Why can't you stop messing with Harry? Do you seriously plan on not becoming Voldemort? You're just going to lie about it, and fuck him up, and —'

‘Yeah, yeah, you’ve got me,’ Tom said. ‘A shame Harry doesn’t know that, right?’

The look on their faces was priceless.

‘You —’ Weasley breathed, ‘you —you—’

‘Do you ever stop lying?’ Granger burst out. ‘It isn’t funny, Riddle, and if you aren’t serious then why can’t you leave him alone?’

Tom sighed. ‘Why can’t you comprehend that I actually *like* Harry? Do you think that little of me?’ His lips twitched. ‘Don't answer that.’

‘Well, no offence, Riddle, but your word means absolutely nothing.’ Weasley crossed his arms. ‘Why’d you change your mind?’

‘Because I realised how cruel and self-destructing my plans are?’

‘No.’

‘Because …’ Tom winced. They were actually forcing him to say it. ‘It’s not worth becoming Voldemort if I can’t be with your stupid friend. How about that?’

‘Don’t call Harry stupid,’ Weasley said.

‘How about you stop questioning everything I say? I like Harry more than I like the idea of *killing the both of you,* and that’s quite a bit considering how testing this conversation is.’

He didn’t explain it to them. The heat he felt around Harry, the rushing, all-consuming desire that overrode everything else. Or the warmth beneath it; that strange fluttering in his chest that made his breath catch when he tried to examine it.

The knowledge of his feelings wasn’t paralysing anymore but quiet and contemplative. Harry was *his.* And Tom would never care what either of them thought.

‘You do like him,’ Granger accused, her mouth parting as though this was some great revelation.

‘Are you satisfied?’

‘Absolutely not,’ Weasley said. ‘You’re still a complete bastard. And I don't trust you.’

Tom smiled blandly at them. ‘It’s mutual, I promise. Now is there anything else I can help you with? No?’ He adjusted his bag. ‘Well, see you around. I should probably go and meet with Harry. He’ll be wondering where I am.’

Weasley clenched his fists. Granger gave him another frustrated look.

And as he made his way down the corridor, Tom hummed under his breath.

It was worth it.

As they made their way back from the Room of Requirement, Harry ran his fingers through his hair. Something light had settled in his chest, warm and satiated. The weather was still nice, the halls were almost empty, and he had convinced Tom to sit outside by saying that he would definitely get sunburned. Naturally, Tom had to prove this wasn’t the case.

Harry’s mouth twitched at the memory —kissing slow and languid; Tom’s eyes, clear, amused and flecked crimson — and he paused when he brushed over his scar.

He didn’t think about it that much anymore. He jolted at the realisation and ran his finger over it thoughtfully. Pale, smooth and closed over, the scar bothered him no more than the one on his arm, long and jagged, or the one stretching faintly across his hand. There was a finality in the warmth it emitted, the warmth that matched the rest of his skin.

Harry patted down his hair and they walked on. The hallway was quiet and the portraits were talking among themselves. They made their way down the stairs, past the glinting suits of armour, the Great Hall, the corridor leading to the dungeons.

‘What?’ Tom asked, catching something on Harry’s face.

Harry stopped outside the front doors and looked around the castle and out to the grounds. The sun was sinking over the Lake, smearing the sky red, and the grass rippled. There was a group of students underneath the willow trees, and half a dozen Gryffindors tossing

around a quaffle, their laughter floating up the hill.

‘It’s nothing,’ Harry said, and a smile flickered over his lips. He looked at Tom from the corner of his eye. ‘It’s nothing at all.’

They stepped out of the castle. A flock of sparrows burst from the trees and wove towards the skyline in a flurry of wings. Tom nodded, small and purposeful, and they made their way onwards, out into the cooling evening.

THE END.

Chapter End Notes

And … that’s the end.

I honestly can’t believe this fic is (finally) complete! When I started it two years ago, I never expected it to end up where it is now. I also never expected it to take quite so long to write but that’s another story.

Thank you so much to everyone who has commented, kudoed, bookmarked or subscribed to the fic over the years. (And also, to anyone who is reading silently—I appreciate it!). I never expected the reception this fic has gotten and I’m so amazed and grateful to everyone who read and *hopefully* enjoyed it. And it may sound strange but I will miss everyone who has commented regularly! I really love hearing your thoughts so much and thinking up responses. (I promise I’ll reply to chapter 50’s comments soon). So feel free to comment, even though the fic is officially over. And thanks once again!

I know the ending is a bit open which may be disappointing for some people but I did want to leave it with the potential to come back to. Delving into Harry and Tom’s futures' is something that would take more than an epilogue to do justice (and I’m also too traumatised from the DH epilogue to attempt one myself). I like leaving things open to the reader’s interpretation, especially considering how so many people have different ideas on how the future could unfold for these two. I don’t want to say ‘this is what happens,’ ‘this is what they’ll do,’ especially when that’s an entire other story to tell. ;D

I cannot promise a sequel to this fic (but maybe!) but I do plan on

writing some other Tomarry things in the future. I really fell in love with this pairing and have so many ideas floating around in my head for them.

So thanks again for reading. I really hope you enjoyed <3

17/3/22: I'm sorry this fic took so long to reupload, I've been dealing with a lot of personal issues recently. Thank you so much to anyone who read the fic. I really hope you liked it and I'm sorry again :) I promise I'll get around to the comments soon

Works inspired by this one

[Restricted Work] by whoreforhandholding

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!